

Bad Brains by **Michael-hearteyes-wheeler**

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Summary: When a mysterious new girl moves to Hawkins from Chicago, it's all eyes on her. With her patched up leather jackets, slicked back hair, dark rimmed eyes, and a constant scowl, El Hopper is a total punk rocker, the likes of which Hawkins has never seen. She preaches about the radical underground revolution she left behind, and she opens up the minds of those around her.

1. 1) First day in Hell (But All goes well)

Hello Everyone!

I have always been obsessed with the 80s, and with the very political underground punk scene of that era, so I decided to write about it! I know that Punk!El and Nerd!Mike isn't a super original AU for this fandom, but nothing else I have read really captures the true punk scene of that time period. This fic does get a bit political, and El is definitely pretty hardcore, but I was going for punk rock accuracy rather than canon character accuracy.

I really hope you enjoy the first chapter, and I hope you will stick around to read the rest if you did!

Thanks, Allie xx

August 16th, 1985

"Don't be nervous, kid. It's going to be fine." Hoppers voice said from somewhere behind her.

El Hopper had been staring out the window of her father's truck the entire drive. She watched the passing trees, and cows that roamed around the open fields with a strange sense of disdain. But now that they were stopped in the Hawkins High parking lot, the only thing outside El's window was packs of gossiping teens, and far too many brain-dead losers.

Today was not only El's first day of school in the cozy town of Hawkins, but it was also her first day of Junior year.

El's adoptive father, new Hawkins Chief of Police Jim Hopper, had gone to school here when he was a kid, and he promised her it was a better environment than her old school in Chicago. But Jim being in high school seemed like a lifetime ago, and he had no way of knowing what it was like to be the new kid, the class spectacle, the school freak, the *weirdo*.

El knew that in a tiny town like this, word travels fast. She had seen the way people gawked at her when she walked around downtown, or when she shopped around the record store, and she understood why. With her slicked back hair, leather jackets, and dark makeup, she was something that no one in Hawkins had ever encountered.

A real life, non-conforming, patriarchy-smashing, Punk Rocker from the big city.

She took in a deep breath and slowly pushed open the car door, stepping out into the warm August air. She slung her new backpack over her shoulder and braced herself, she could already see some girls off in the distance pointing at her.

Hopper chuckled, noticing her tension. "Don't go getting into any fights." She turned around with a puzzled look on her face and he smiled. "Or just don't get caught."

She rolled her eyes and felt the smallest smile tug at the corners of her mouth. Jim- her dad- always had a way of making her feel better. He understood what she had been through, or at least the things she had told him, and he let her be true to herself.

She waved goodbye as he drove away and walked towards her imminent doom.

Everyone she passed took a moment to stop and stare at her, with very little regard for not being obvious. It made El feel sick to her stomach. The way everyone wore their hair the same, and dressed the same, and gossiped about pointless bullshit the same. Someone blasted a stupid pop song from their boombox, and someone else sprayed cheap Farrah Fawcett hairspray in the crowded hallway, practically choking El as she passed by.

'God, this is hell.'

She thought to herself as she finally found her locker. She put away some of her textbooks and hung up the tiny magnetic mirror that Hopper had given her on the back of her locker door. She checked herself out, making sure her face said 'leave me alone or i'll kill you' with enough malice, and when she was confident it did, she walked

to her first period.

The day went by mostly in a blur. Lots of morons talking way to loudly about things she didn't care about, lots of stunned stares and girls whispering about her, and lots of teachers looking at her like an alien. She must have said 'I don't go by Jane, it's El.' a hundred times and it was only 4th period.

This was going to be a long day, and an even longer year. At least she had been able to sneak a cigarette behind the dumpster during lunch. The burning smoke helped calm her down and it certainly sent a message that she was not to be messed with.

She just wished that there was at least *one* person in all of Hawkins that wasn't a complete waste of space, but as the hours went by, that wish felt more and more impossible.

"Have you seen the new girl yet?" Dustin whispered to Mike during the passing period.

Mike rolled his eyes. He had been hearing about this 'new girl' all day. Supposedly she was some freak from Chicago. The rumors about her were numerous, and crude. According to the gossip, she was a demented, devil worshiping, ex-convict, who just broke out of the loony bin. New kids always have it pretty hard, but these stories were intense, even for the caliber of bullshit that came out of the mouths of Hawkins Highs finest bullies.

"No I haven't seen her yet. And even if I did, im sure she isn't as bad as everyone is saying." Mike sighed as he opened his locker to exchange his history books for the new English ones.

"Well I just saw her and believe me she really is bad!" Dustin expressed, eyes wide. Mike snorted and shut his locker, ignoring Dustin's warnings. "Im serious! And I heard that she is in your English class."

Dustin's last statement made Mike pause. Not because he genuinely thought she was a lunatic trying to outrun the law, but because the last thing he needed was another class with a school bully. It was bad

enough that nearly half of the jocks were crammed together, drooling and pea brained, in his History class. And it was worse that he shared Gym with Troy and James. All he wanted was one subject where he didn't have to worry about getting taunted, or shoved, or have to pick spit wads out of his hair.

"Godspeed my brave Paladin." Dustin slapped a supportive hand on Mike's shoulder. Mike took a deep breath and walked towards his Advanced English class, and his possible demise.

When he opened the door, the sunny teacher greeted him and it eased his suspicions. There was an available chair upfront near the window and he took it right away, knowing bullies never sat up front. He turned around in his chair, craning his neck to look over the gossiping mass of Seniors. It was intimidating to say the least, that he was in fact the only Junior in a room full of upperclassmen, but at least he knew all of them. He didn't see anyone who looked like a satanic/prison escapee, or anyone he didn't recognize for that matter. He breathed a sigh of relief and turned back around as the bell rang.

'Maybe Dustin was wrong, maybe she won't be in this class.'

But his silent hopes were quickly squandered as a late comer opened the door and stepped into the room. The chattering class room fell to a silent halt. All eyes turned sharply to watch the new girl shuffle in, in all of her scathing glory.

Her hair was slicked back in a dark, but somehow feminine, James Dean fashion. Her eyes were rimmed in smokey black and grey eyeshadow, and her lips were tinted the slightest shade of purple. She wore an over-sized red and black men's flannel despite the balmy summer heat, and a leather skirt that cut off just above her knees. Her hand painted band shirt was tucked in, but her black tights were ripped and torn all over, and her clunky boots made her footsteps heavy and loud as she stomped to an empty desk in the back of the room.

The room broke out in hushed whispers. She really did look like she would kick some ass if she needed to. But as Mike watched her long trek to the far corner of the room he couldn't help but notice the subtle look of embarrassment and unease underneath her uncaring

gaze. She didn't seem like some raging maniac at all, she was just a girl who is scared on her first day at a new school.

'And she is actually kind of pretty.'

Mike thought with a strange smile, watching her take her seat. She blew a bubble of the cherry gum she was chewing and felt his eyes on her. She turned to look at him, flashing her best 'don't mess with me' face and he snapped around to face the front of the room.

"Dork." El whispered to herself in the back of the room. But an unusual feeling churned in her stomach and she suppressed the urge to smile. When she had looked at him, she had expected to see the same stunned hostility that she had seen in the eyes from everyone else; but instead he was looking at her like she was just a regular person, and not the freak she felt like.

The rest of the week was more of the same. Same reluctant car ride, same boring lectures from teachers, same clearly intended whispers and gossiping, same desperation to be anywhere other than a school in rural Indiana.

It became a painful routine; 1st, 2nd, 3rd period, don't talk to anyone, don't draw attention to yourself. At lunch just grab an apple or a sandwich, *never* get the mystery meat, eat outside alone behind the dumpster, smoke 1 or 2 or even 3 cigarettes (depending on how shitty that day had been). Then 4th period, 5th, and 6th and finally get to go home and play music so loud it shakes the house until Hopper came home.

It was monotonous, and agonizingly boring, but it was the perfect recipe to stay out of trouble and fly just under the radar.

El spent most of her time silently people watching from the back of her various classrooms. People act completely different when they think no one is watching. In the few weeks she had been in Hawkins, El had studied her new neighbors, and peers through a fine lens. She knew who was secretly a softy, and who was secretly a jerk, she knew when people were lying, and she knew when people were telling the truth. It was a coping skill that she had learned growing up in

Chicago, because out there you are a little fish in a big pond, and you have to keep yourself safe.

By week two of school, she could already tell who was a bully, and who was popular, as well as the general layout of the Hawkins High social ladder. A ladder that she was at the very bottom of.

There were a few people that she considered to be less appalling than others. The curly haired dork in her biology class who always wore hats and was often called 'Toothless'; He seemed nice enough, and it made her giggle whenever he would look at her like he was scared shitless. There was also a small quiet boy in her drawing class, Will, who was extremely talented and had complimented her The Clash t-shirt last week. And that red-headed chick who always skateboarded around during lunch break. But El was certainly not going to actually *talk* to any of them, she was just trying to make it through each day without being noticed (another tactic she had learned in Chicago).

Growing up in foster care is rough, and El was thankful everyday for being out of the dump that she called a home for the first 12 years of her life, but it had taught her alot about playing it safe and being invisible.

At least she thought it had, until a group of vicious preppy bitches decided to teach El a lesson in just how clearly visible they thought she was.

El couldn't go outside to eat today because it was pouring rain and she wasn't about to sacrifice her hair, or hand-painted patches, even for a cigarette and a chance to be alone. So she walked through the line and grabbed an apple like always, but instead of taking the exit door to her favorite hideout, she sat at a lonely table in the corner of the room.

She could feel the eyes watching her, and she could hear the whispers, but she tried to ignore them all by listening to her walkman with the volume turned up full blast. She looked around the room, trying to find some 'subjects' to observe to pass the time when she notices that Toothless- Dustin -, Will, and the dork from English were all sitting together, along with the boy from PE, Lucas was it?.

'I guess nerds have to stick together.' She chuckled to herself, taking a bite from her apple.

That's when she noticed the group of girls she had come to know quite well walking towards her.

Tammy, Katie, Sharon, and Heather. AKA the Bitch brigade. El's locker was just across from Tammy's and she had made it quite clear that she didn't like a newcomer in her school.

"Why don't you go back to the loony bin, you trashy slut!" Tammy had yelled at El on the second day of school. Her shrill voice and sickeningly sweet cotton candy perfume were enough to make El feel like vomiting.

"Bite me." El hissed through her teeth. The blonde bimbo simply flipped her side-ponytail in reply and sauntered off. That had only been the beginning.

El found hateful notes in her locker almost everyday, and she had actually been tripped by Sharon, the largest, ugliest girl of the group. If it were a different situation El would have kicked their asses already, but her dad was a cop and she knew he would find out. So she just tried her best to ignore it. Which was really difficult when they were surrounding her table.

"What do you want, Tammy?" El sighed, taking another bite of her apple and trying her best to seem unfazed.

"I want you to get out of my town, dirtbag." Tammy said crossing her arms. Her henchmen giggled behind her.

"You and me both. But that isn't going to happen anytime soon so why don't you do yourself a favor and get bent." El hissed.

"Hey, Tammy do you smell that?" Heather giggled.

"Yeah something smells like slutty trash." Katie added. El looked from girl to girl, knowing they were referring to her but not knowing what their end game was.

"I think its little miss gutter punk over here." Tammy sneered. "Why

don't we help her out."

The girls all laughed in unison, and before El had anytime to react, Sharon pulled a massive bag of stinking garbage out from behind her and dumped it on Els head.

El gasped and stood up, her clothes dripping with old soda, and milk from that days school breakfast. Ketchup covered french fries stuck to her jacket and shirt, and a half eaten pizza slice slid off of her jeans, leaving a long trail of red sauce and grease. Not only was she covered in filth, but her backpack and walkman were also drenched. El was seconds away from diving over the table and punching Tammy into the ground, but as she shook the trash from her hair she noticed that the entire cafeteria was staring at her, and her rage turned into intense embarrassment.

"See now you smell so much better. You should really be thanking us!" Tammy chuckled, her and her henchmen high-fiving as they walked away. El was in shock. She didn't know whether to scream or cry, but when other people around the lunchroom joined in the vile laughter she knew she just needed to get out of there. She grabbed her ruined walkman and bag, and hurried out of the exit door.

It was still raining hard, much to hard to walk home in, but it helped wash away the garbage juice from her hair and clothes. The place she always took refuge in during lunch had a small ledge above it, so if she stood with her back pressed up against the wall she didn't get drenched directly. She dropped her bag on the ground and fished out her pack of cigarettes and lighter. Her shirt was ruined, and her jeans probably would be too. There was no way in hell she was going to go back into the school, not when she stunk this bad, and definitely not when she was crying this hard.

She hadn't cried in a long time, not since the day Hopper had adopted her. But out here in the cold, covered in trash, and full of shame, it seemed like the only thing she could do.

Mike had watched the entire ordeal happen. He knew those girls were nothing but trouble, and when he saw that Sharon was holding the big black garbage bag he knew that nothing good could come of whatever they were planning.

It was pretty impressive, the way El held her composure through Tammy's taunting. Whenever he got picked on he always clammed up. It was usually easier to just get shoved around than it was to actually stand up for himself.

"That is so shitty!." Mike huffed, watching El try her best to shake the garbage from her hair. "Like they are treating *her* like she is the monster when they are the ones being awful!" He stood up, slamming his fists on the table.

"I agree." Dustin muttered with his mouth full of food. "But that's what happens when you dress like a freak. If you don't want anyone to pay attention to you, you have to tone it down."

"That's bullshit and you know it. We don't dress like that and we get bullied all the time." Mike grimaced.

"Yeah but imagine how much worse it would be if we did." Lucas said, shuddering at the thought.

Mike watched El grab her things and practically run out the back door. "I'm gonna go see if she is okay." He grabbed his own stuff and followed her.

"Don't do it Mike! Its social suicide!" Dustin hollered at his friends reseeding form.

"As if I could fall any lower!" Mike said, whipping around and rolling his eyes.

"He has a point." Will chuckled.

Mike burst through the schools back door. It was raining so hard he could hardly see. He looked across the parking lot but didn't see anyone. He walked along the edge of the school, trying to stay under the slight awning above him. Then he saw a puff of smoke rising up from behind a dumpster.

'That has to be her.'

He composed himself and walked forward, not exactly knowing what to say in a situation like this. 'Sorry' didn't quite seem to cover it, and

'Hey i've been dumped *in* a trash can before' felt too stupid. He knew what it was like to be publicly humiliated, and he knew that when you felt that low, you just needed someone to tell you that it was okay.

He took a deep breath and continued forward, but stopped short when he heard the unmistakable sound of wheels on cement. He spun around to see Max, the schools previous resident new kid/ touch chick, skating towards him. She swerved around him and threw him a puzzled glance before rounding the dumpster and jumping off her board.

"Hey, I saw what happened in there." Max said, her voice muffled by the rain. "That was really messed up."

Mike heard El mumble something in reply and then Max laughed. He suddenly felt like a big dope, and clearly Max had this under control. So he walked back inside, head hung in a mixture of disappointment and embarrassment. Disappointment because oddly enough, he wanted to be the one to make El feel better, because he knew what it was like, and embarrassment because he was probably the last person that El would want advice from.

'What would a dork like me be able to say to make someone like her feel better? I'll bet she has beaten up more people than Troy and James put together.'

He sighed and sat back down with his friends.

"That was fast. Did you talk to her?" Lucas asked.

"No, Max Mayfield beat me too it." He muttered, dabbing at his wet hair with one of Wills napkins.

"Max Mayfield!? Son of a bitch now they are going to be best friend and probably burn down the school or something." Dustin rubbed his temples in frustration.

"Max isn't *that* crazy." Lucas sneered, elbowing Dustin in the arm.

"Maybe not, but the new girl might be!" Dustin elbowed him back.

"She is actually kind of nice." Will muttered quietly from the end of the table.

"You have talked to her!?" The three other boys said in unison.

"Not really. But we have drawing together and she is pretty good, and she is always quiet and stuff. Plus she likes good music."

"And if they gang up together, maybe they will become so powerful that they will take out all of the other bullies. Becoming a reigning super bully!" Dustin shouted, suddenly excitedly.

"I thought you didn't want them to be friends." Mike glared at the curly haired boy.

"I don't, but it's too late for that now so i'm looking on the bright side. If they kill Troy, and Tammy, and the other mouthbreathers then we only have two people to be afraid of."

Mike threw a crumpled napkin at Dustin and they all shared a laugh.

Dustin's predictions were almost eerily correct, as usual. Max and El become best friends. They were a feared dynamic duo of kick-ass-ness. They walked together to school everyday, and smoked together every lunch. They must have done something to get back at Tammy, because after only a week, the once high and mighty Bitch Brigade had stopped messing with anyone all together.

They were menacing when solitary, but together they were unstoppable. No one messed with the police chiefs adoptive daughter after that, and no one dared cross 'Madmax' Mayfield. It was the first real friend El had made since her days in the foster home, and Max was a good ally to have. After all, she had come up with the brilliant plan of breaking into Heather's locker and filling her perfume bottle with vinegar, as well as leaving a couple of the biology rats in Katie and Sharon's lockers. The cherry on top, however, was the secret admirer letter for Tammy from a guy who never existed, who asked her on a date that no one else would show up too.

"Have fun on your date last night Tammy?" Max had asked, practically cackling. The realization that A) no one actually thought

that she was 'as beautiful as a rose, and as sweet as honey', and B) that Max and El had been the ones to make her look like a fool in front of the entire restaurant sent her running into the girls room crying.

Maybe High school in a tiny shithole like Hawkins wasn't going to be that bad after all.

2. 2) Horror Business

Hello Everyone! Thank you for you sweet comments on chapter 1! I'm happy you are enjoying the story so far, and I hope you continue too!

This chapter was so fun to write, hope you enjoy.

Allie xx

"I really think this is a bad idea."

El had been repeating that phrase over and over again as she and Max, snuck through the empty school hallways.

"For the last time, everything is going to be fine!" Max snapped back in a half whisper, half yell. "And besides, this idea is awesome." Max's face quirked back into the same devilish grin she had been flaunting all day in preparation for her master plan.

They were going to cover Mr. Thompson's classroom in toilet paper.

Mr. Thompson was one of the most hated teachers in school, and the pop quiz he had sprung on his entire class had only made matters worse. El and Max were now failing, as were most of the Hawkins High Junior student body. The girls were pissed to say the least, and Max had come up with the 'brilliant' plan to get back at him by trashing his classroom. At first it seemed like a hilarious, even justifiable way to get back at the world's worst History teacher, but now that El and Max were sneaking through the school, backpacks full of toilet paper and eggs, it didn't feel so thrilling.

"If we get caught we are going to be dead for sure." El whispered, her eyes anxiously peering around the set of lockers they were using as cover.

"We won't get caught!" Max whisper/yelled again. "It's a Friday after school, no one would be caught dead hanging around here. So all we have to do is avoid any teachers who are still packing up for the

weekend. Now come on!"

Max decided the coast was clear, and the two girls tiptoed down the next hallway. They were only a few turns away from their target, but they were coming up on the teachers lounge, and they could hear chatter coming from inside. The girls waited silently in a small drinking fountain alcove, and as soon as the gossiping teachers left, they ran into the final hall.

El had to admit, it was kind of exciting, and if she could get a grip on her anxiety she might have actually had fun. She was only a few months into her first semester of High school in a new town, and she had already made quite the name for herself with Max's help.

"Badass girls like us need to stick together." Max had said that fateful day behind the dumpster, while El was covered in garbage sludge. Max had been the new kid before El came along, so she knew a thing or two about being the town spectacle.

They were the dynamic duo, and everyone knew not to mess with them. Whether they were walking around downtown, sneaking cigarettes behind the gym, or pulling some elaborate prank, they were always at each others sides. And now as they ran from locker bank to locker bank, it was hard to believe they had only been friends for a few months.

"Shit do you hear that!?" El squeaked as she heard the unmistakable sound of dress shoes on linoleum. There were no reses, or empty classrooms to duck into in this particular wing. El felt like her heart was going to beat out of her chest, but Max was cool and stealthy. The fire haired girl grabbed El's wrist and pulled her into the only door on this side of the building. It looked like maybe a janitor's closet or storage room, but lucky for them it was unlocked.

They threw the door open and rushed inside, just as Mr. Thompson himself rounded the corner towards them. Max eased the door shut as not to make a sound, and the girls whipped around to find four sets of wide eyes staring at them.

"What are you doing?" A boy El recognized as Lucas 'Midnight' Sinclair said from the corner of the room. She had a few classes with

him, and some of the other boys in the room as well

Shit. They had walked in on the school nerds.

"We didn't think anyone would be in here." Max huffed, crossing her arms.

"Okay... But why are you in here at all?" Dustin 'Toothless' Henderson said standing up. She shared more classes with him than the other boys, but they had never talked.

"Were hiding." Max said matter-of-factly.

"From what?" Will Byers eyes widened. If something was scary enough to make El and Max hide, then he was doomed.

"None of your business!" Max said, looking down her nose at the boys.

"Uh it kind of is our business. You just barged in here and disrupted out meeting." The forth boy stood up from his seat behind the rooms small table. El almost gasped when she saw it was none other than Mike 'Frogface' Wheeler.

Of course it was, wherever the other dorks where Mike was sure to be. She had English with him, and while she would never admit it, she had always thought he was kind of cute. Most of the boys at school made her want to gag, but something about Mike was different. But he was a nerd, and she knew Max would never let her live it down. She mentally slapped herself back into the situation at hand.

"Meeting? Like a dork convention." Max snickered, but the boys faces were serious. "Look, we didn't know that this was your little club house okay? We just didn't want Mr. Thompson to see us."

"Mr. Thompson? Ugh that guy is the worst!" Lucas groaned.

"No shit! That's why we are gonna pull a prank on him to get back for that stupid pop quiz." Max boasted, leaning back against the door frame.

"Really!" What are you going to do?" Dustin asked, suddenly giddy.

"Why? So you can go tattle on me?" Max patronized.

During this entire ordeal El just shuffled around nervously. While she was no stranger to confrontation, Max usually took the lead. El found herself glancing up at Mike, and more times than not he was already staring at her.

'Of course he is! You are some weird stranger who just interrupted his meeting' El told herself feeling like a dope.

Mike was staring at El, but it wasn't just because she was a weird stranger. From the first time he walked into their shared English class and saw her black rimmed eyes and 'Black Flag' t-shirt he knew that she was no joke, and when she started hanging around Max it only got worse. Those girls gave off a vibe that said 'run for the hills' and together they were a seemingly unstoppable force of pure punk rock power. But to his surprise, she was always quiet, and respectful. She never 'threatened to beat someone up' or 'raved like a lunatic' the way everyone had predicted. Over the months he had found himself feeling quite fond of watching the way she chewed her pencil, or the way she scrunched her face when she didn't know the answer to a question. And now that she was standing in his AV Club, he couldn't stop staring at her. The way she shifted her weight back and forth, clearly just as uncomfortable with the situation as he was, it made her seem completely harmless, despite the black rimmed eyes and leather jacket.

'Maybe she isn't a total freak.'

He took a deep breath and steadied himself, listening in on the argument Max was having with Lucas and Dustin.

"Fine! We are going to TP his classroom!" Max finally snapped, throwing her arms up in the air from exasperation.

"Really!?" All four boys gasped in unison.

"Yes really. And if you tell anyone you are dead!" She jabbed a finger at them.

The boys looked at each other, and then back at the girls. Lucas whispered something to Dustin, and Dustin whispered something back. They really were dorky. Like they all shared one super brain. Max rolled her eyes and turned around to peak through the door.

"I think it's clear now. So sorry for interrupting your little geek gathering or whatever but we have business to finish." Max waved at the boys condescendingly and pulled the door open a bit wider, but Dustin cut her off.

"Can we come with you?" He blurted, much louder and faster than he had meant to. Max's face creased in confusion and she slowly turned back around, closing the door behind her.

"You want to come with us?" Her voice was like venom.

"I don't think that is a good idea." Mike scoffed at his curly haired friend.

"Yes it is, Mike! Thompson is an asshole." Dustin retorted.

"It would be awesome!" Lucas added.

"What if we get caught?" Will piped up sheepishly.

"I never said you could come!" Max interjected, yelling over the banter.

"Well... Can Dustin and I come at least?" Lucas stepped forward smiling, backpack in hand.

Max and El eyed each other with similar looks of confusion. Nerds weren't supposed to want to break rules and pull pranks, were they? Max pulled El arms so she could whisper into her ear, cupping a hand over her mouth to block it from the boys view.

"What the hell do they want to come along for?" Max whispered sharply.

"Everyone hates Thompson I guess." El whispered back, mirroring Max's hand position.

"But they are going to ruin the whole thing! I bet they have never pulled a prank in their lives." Max scowled in disgust.

El thought for a moment, she wasn't so sure that Max was right. In the classes she shared with Dustin, he had shown up late almost more times than she had. And he had certainly gotten in more trouble for talking during a lecture. She had seen Lucas reading comic books behind his textbook, and she had noticed him casually pass test answers to other kids in class while pretending to yawn. She had even seen Mike mess with their English teacher a time or too by shutting off or unplugging the projector so she couldn't give her presentation. They were nerds for sure, but maybe they were a bit more wild than Max was giving them credit for.

"Thompson just left so we are in the clear. It might be fun." El encouraged, glancing over at the very eager Lucas and Dustin.

"Fine." Max sighed rolling her eyes and pulling away from their huddle. "You can come. But try to keep up?" Max whipped around and opened the door again.

El followed her out, looking up and down the now deserted hallway. Dustin and Lucas were right on her heels, muttering to each other excitedly. El looked back at them, and was stunned to see tiny Will and a hesitant Mike following as well. The group made their way down the long hallway and stopped at Thompson door. Max reached out for the handle but the door didn't budge.

"Its locked!" She turned around and threw her arms up with frustration. "El do you have a bobby pin?" Max asked hopefully, but she already knew the answer. El shook her head. She never wore bobby pins, instead always wearing her hair slicked back with a firm layer of Aquanet and pomade.

The boys faces fell in disappointment. Here was their chance to do something cool and it was over before it even started! Mike sighed and dropped his backpack to the floor and started digging through it. Everyone turned to look at him, questioning what he could possibly need at a time like this. A moment later he pulled a small key chain from one of the front pocket and walked towards the door. He searched through to find the right key and a second later he pushed

the door open. He still looked a bit annoyed, but El could see the secret pride and excitement in his eyes.

"Way to go, Wheeler!" Max slapped him hard on the back and ran into the open room, the other boys all pouring in after her. Mike held the door open and El fell to the back of the line.

"How do you have his key?" El asked astonished.

Mike chuckled and tucked the key ring back into his bag. "I'm the AV club president, so they gave me a master key to all the doors in the school." El watched the slightest tint of red creep over his cheeks, illuminating his freckles.

'Freckles!?' He has freckles? I thought he was cute before but now-' El shook the thought out of her head and walked into the room.

Max reached into her own bag and passed a roll of toilet paper out to each of the boys. El retrieved the rolls from her own bag and handed Mike a carton of eggs. Mike eyed the carton suspiciously, but El noticed the corners of his mouth turning up in eager anticipation. Will locked the door behind them and as everyone got into position, now armed and ready, the room sprang into action.

Toilet paper went soaring through the air, this way and that, like white comets. Dustin yelled with excitement and jumped on top of Mr. Thompson's desks, kicking his papers onto the floor and wrapping his chair in tissue.

Lucas and Max ran up and down the rows of desks, until each and every chair was knotted into a web of paper. Will found Thompson's chalkboard erasers and slammed them together, sending multicolored dust out over the room and covering every surface. El abandoned her toilet paper and joined Mike at the front of the room, one by one they sent the eggs flying like grenades.

"Max duck!" El screamed as a poorly aimed egg almost clocked her in the side of the head. Max was almost too busy laughing with Lucas to hear, but she avoided the egg missile just in time. El was laughing so hard that she felt like her stomach was going to split open, and Mike was giggling right alongside her.

Dustin sent his last roll careening over the room into El hands, and she sent it back so it criss-crossed the entire classroom. The scene was perfect. This would take hours to clean up! Maybe even days if the eggs spoiled over the weekend! El and Max had Thompson first period, and there was no way in hell he was going to be able to have class in all the mess, he would have to cancel for sure.

"Holy shit!" Lucas gaped, pointing a finger at the front of the class where Will was creating a masterpiece.

There on the blackboard, Will had drawn a crude caricature of Mr. Thompson, with a largely exaggerated nose dripping snot, and a bird flying over his head that was making a mess of its own. Will was adding the finishing touch: a speech bubble stating 'I'm an asshole!' The entire image was the perfect finishing touch to a trashed classroom.

The boys all cheered for Will, patting him on the back. Max and El were shocked, the nerds were almost more into this prank than they were.

"I told you it would be fun to bring them." El elbowed her friend playfully in the side.

"And I told you this was a great idea from the start!" Max elbowed her back. "Plus you just wanted to show off for your little dorky *boyfriend*" Max stretched out the last word into a sing-songy phrase. El eyes went wide and she turned sharply to make sure the boys had not heard.

"What are you talking about!?" El snapped, whisper/yelling just like before.

"You know exactly what i'm talking about! You stare at him all the time like a big dope." Max clasped her hands together and batted her eyes for dramatic effect.

"I do not!" El said, slightly louder then he had meant to.

"Do to! But whatever, I mean I guess he isn't a *complete* dweeb." Max elbowed her again and El just stared back completely floored. She

had been so careful! How had Max known!?

Max stepped past a dumbfounded El and addressed the giddy boys, still high off of their first real encounter with breaking the rules. "Alright nerds, we need to get out of here." She grabbed her backpack from the floor and threw it over her shoulder.

The rest of the group followed suit and they headed back out into the desolate hallway. El, still a bit bewildered, hung behind to make sure they didn't leave any evidence behind.

"Do you guys do stuff like this a lot?" A voice snapped her to attention. Mike's voice.

El hadn't realized that she wasn't alone and she felt hot red blush roll over her face. "Uhh... not really just... sometimes." She stuttered.

'Stop being a loser. It's just Mike Wheeler!' She thought, trying to steady herself.

"Where you the ones who poured cooking oil all over the gym floor?" Mike asked smiling. El nodded, a reminiscent grin stretching across her face.

"That was awesome! I was really thankful because it was-

"Dodgeball day." El interrupted, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear. Her hair always lost its sleek composure at the end of a long day.

"Yeah! Exactly." Mike's was beaming at her, and it made her feel like she was going to explode. "Were you the ones who put bees in Principal Murphy's car!?" He asked taking a step towards her.

"No that one wasn't us, I heard it was a couple of Sophomores, but it was a good one!" El felt strangely proud. "But we did replace Troy's stupid switchblade with a toy." She smirked.

"That was you!? Oh my god that was the funniest thing I had ever seen! He was so pissed! He whipped out his knife all menacing and then it was just plastic!" Mike chuckled at the memory, and El joined him in imagining the look on his face but then it became clear what

he had just admitted to.

"Wait... Troy tried to pull his knife on you?" El gaped.

Mike nervously scratched the back of his neck and shrugged. "Uh yeah... but it's not big deal, it's not like it was the first time. But I guess you like saved me or whatever so thanks." He smiled crookedly at her.

'Troy you absolute bastard who do you think you are!?' El wanted to scream

But that probably was too much to say to someone she had just officially met. So instead she shrugged. "You're welcome." She tried to say it smugly the way Max would have but it came out more whole-hearted than intended.

"Hey love-birds! Are you coming or not!?" Max yelled through the open door, skateboard in hand.

Els eyes widened in shock, before settling into an angry grimace, eyes piercing like daggers sending a look of 'how dare you say that i'm going to kick your ass.' But Max just laughed and motioned for them to follow.

They headed out into the hallway and Mike locked the door behind them. They walked with Max out through one of the seldom used back doors of the school and met up with the other boys.

Will, Lucas, and Dustin were enthusiastically recounting every detail of the event that had occurred less than five minutes before. El giggled at them but Max just rolled her eyes.

"Thanks for helping us out in there or whatever. We did a lot more damage with your added tenacity." Max said, only half sarcastically.

"It was really cool! We have never done anything like that before." Lucas smiled, missing her cynicism.

"Yeah no shit." Max smiled, playfully punched Lucas in the arm. "Just don't think that this makes us friends."

The boys faces fell from excited to hurt. Clearly they hadn't picked up on the fact that almost everything Max said was laced thick with sarcasm.

"Oh... well yeah... We wouldn't want to be friends with you anyway." Dustin crossed his arms.

Max and El looked at each other equally puzzled. Had they taken her seriously? Both girls couldn't help but laugh, leaning over and holding their guts. The boys shuffled nervously, feeling uncomfortable.

Max punched Dustin in his arm the way she had Lucas just a moment before. "You guys are cooler than I would have thought. We will see you losers, Monday." She dropped her skateboard on the ground and hopped aboard, kicking off and slowly coasting down the hill.

"Wait so... are we friends or not?" Dustin hollered behind her completely clueless.

El was about to turn around and follow her friend, when she decided that they looked too dejected to just bail. So she smiled and tried to look non threatening and addressed Mike before turning around to leave. "We are going to the arcade tomorrow around lunch time. You should meet us there."

"Uh..." Mike looked behind him at his friends who all nodded quickly. "yeah sure." Mike mumbled.

"Bitchin' See you then." And with that, El walked down the hill after Max.

The boys watched the girls recede in silence. Lucas, Dustin, and Mike all had massive smiles plastered on their faces. Will was still a bit shaken over the whole situation but he had to admit, he did feel pretty badass.

"Wait... Did she say the arcade?" Dustin finally asked, El's fleeting message finally dawning on him.

"Yeah, I didn't think girls played video games." Will added.

"Well how many girls do you know who skateboard, and pull pranks?" Lucas defeated.

"I guess that's true. They are pretty-" Dustin started.

"Badass." Lucas and Mike mused in unison.

As the girls headed down the hill, they couldn't keep from smiling, and then giggling, and then full force laughing. Max had to stop skating so she wouldn't fall. They had had fun, more fun than they probably would have had just the two of them, and with the school's biggest nerds of all people!

"Did you see Mikes face when he threw those eggs!? His aim was so bad!" El held her gut.

"Because he was too busy making heart-eyes at you!" Max teased, El glared at her but kept laughing. "But did you catch the way Lucas was screaming!? He sounded like an angry bear!" Max giggled.

"He was so trying to impress you!" El teased back, Max's face gaped in exaggerated horror.

"Was not!"

"Was too!"

They continued their roaring laughter, recounting the way Dustin looked like a howler monkey up on the desk, and the way Will had perfectly captured Thompson's ugly mug. Finally they both caught their breathes and regained their composure so they could finally set off again. This time max carried her board and walked next to El.

They walked in silence for a while before El felt a strange anxiety rising in her stomach. She didn't like it when people knew things about her, especially not things that she had tried to hard to hide.

"So how did you know?" She blurted. Max gave her a confused glance so she continued. "That I... like kinda sorta might..." She picked her words carefully. "Kinda *like* Mike Wheeler?"

Max snorted and threw her head back in exasperation. "Because it's

painfully obvious! You stare at him from across the cafeteria like everyday, and sometimes you don't even hear me talking to you in the halls because you see him walking ahead of us or getting into his locker."

El felt her face get hot with embarrassment. Maybe she hadn't been very good at hiding it after all, and it was painful to realize that she really did act like a dweeb around him.

"I don't understand it at all, but I guess some girls are into that whole 'granny knits all my clothes' thing. I figured you would just move on or something. Guess not." Max smirked, patting El firmly on the back.

"Guess not." El sighed, thinking about how much fun she had just had with him. "You were right Max."

The fire haired girl stepped back on her board and looked to El for an explanation

"That was an awesome plan."

3. 3) Game Over, Loser

Hey Everyone! Sorry about the last upload of this chapter being all weird, im not really sure what happened but hopefully reuploading it will fix it! Let me know if its still screwy on your end and ill try again.

Thanks and I hope you enjoy!

Allie xx

"Mike are you awake yet!?" A harsh voice crackle from the corner of his room.

Mike rolled over to face the sound, groaning at the sun pouring through his window.

"Mike!" The voice crackle again. It was Lucas calling on the Supercom that was resting on his dresser, and he sounded pissed. They rarely used the radios now that they were high school, unless of course it was important. Mike looked over at his alarm clock, worrying that he had overslept, but it was only 10am.

He groaned and shuffled over to the radio. "What Lucas? Its 10 on a Saturday! Over."

"Dustin is already over at my house, we have been waiting for you to wake up! Over." Lucas static laced voice snapped over the radio.

"We are meeting Max and El at the Arcade in an hour! Get over here so we can go pick up Will and make it on time! Over and out" Dustin added. Mike heard the familiar sound of Lucas shutting off his radio and the room filled with white noise.

Mike sighed and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. Dustin and Lucas were really obsessing over hanging out with the girls.

'What dweebs' he chuckled to himself.

He pulled open his shirt drawer and began looking around for

something to wear, but nothing felt right. All of his clothes suddenly just looked so... dorky. Maybe he cared a little bit more about this hang out than he thought. He found himself musing about seeing El, and then he kicked himself for thinking that way at all.

'She was just being nice yesterday. You're a loser and she doesn't even know you exist.' He told himself pulling on one of his dozen striped polos.

He raced down the stairs, tossing on his jacket and pulling open the front door.

"Michael! Where do you think you are going?" His mother called from the kitchen, a plate of pancakes in her hands.

"Im late for hanging out with the guys." His voice was still croaky with sleep, and strangely mixed with nervousness. His sister, Nancy, raised an accusing eyebrow at him hearing the poorly buried anxiety.

"Well okay, but be home for dinner." Before Karen could even finish her sentence Mike was already out the door and hopping on his bike.

Max was already almost an hour deep into her weekly Dig Dug marathon. She was the top score by a hefty margin, but she felt the need to push herself further up the score ladder, even if it was only by a few points.

El didn't exactly understand all of the fuss with these video games. She had tried to play a few times, but she barely made it past the first level. So instead she resolved to just stand around, listening to the new Violent Femmes tape on her walkman and watching the people around her. Hawkins was a strange place, full of strange people. Everyone seemed so blissfully ignorant and unaware.

Before Max, El didn't really have many friends. She had a couple here and there but people are phony, and they will hurt you to gain something better. In the city, El had gotten involved with a crowd of game changers. She used to drive around with them, as they spray painted buildings, and stole money from the war criminal oil tycoons at the gas station. While it was always a bit chaotic, and often

frightening, there was never a dull moment. But that was all in her past now, and those 'friends' had left her just like everyone else. So she learned to take a step back, put up a wall of protection, and observe. Because everyone is hiding something.

Everyone, it seemed, but Mike Wheeler.

It all started during the first or second week of 4th period English.

El had spent her first few weeks carefully scoping out her peers, and learning who to avoid. But the one person she couldn't seem to get an angle on was the dark haired nerd who sat in the front row.

Mike Wheeler. With his knitted sweaters, tucked in collared shirts, his ironed pants, and clean shoes. Mike Wheeler, who always raised his hand first, who always knew the correct answer, who genuinely seemed to enjoy learning. Mike Wheeler, who secretly read comic books under the table, who filled entire notebooks with long fantasy stories, and day dreamed out the window.

He was a dork, that was obvious, but he was also unapologetically himself. He was witty, and sarcastic, and easily annoyed. He could space out all class long, doodling on his binder, or looking outside, but still know the answer to every question. El saw the way he would secretly unplug the projector so that Mrs. Fitzgerald wouldn't be able to lecture them, or the way he would purposefully write the wrong answers on his tests so that the kids cheating off of him would still get an F. He was sneaky, and funny, and beyond smart. He was like an alien, from a completely different planet than any El had ever stepped foot on. He was so far from everything that she herself was that she found herself fascinated.

El had been paying extra close attention to him, because he was one of the few people who just seemed to be himself no matter who was looking. It was refreshing to say the least. Even Max layered everything she did in a coat or two of sarcasm and irony.

It had taken a lot to invite him here yesterday, because it broke all of El's rules about protecting herself. He just seemed so nice and harmless, but she knew better than that. People always hide something, some are just much better at keeping it concealed. So as

El waited, leaning against the arcade machine, she found herself being the one to daydream out the window, watching as Mike and his friends arrived.

"Took you guys long enough!" Max grumbled, eyes glued to the screen in front of her.

"Sorry, I overslept." Mike smiled weakly. His voice drowned out by Lucas, Will and Dustin screaming at the sight of Max's newest highscore.

"751300!?"

"That's impossible!" Mike gasped, turning his attention to the screen.

"Impossible for you maybe." Max smirked, her fingers mashing buttons and swiveling the joystick at light speed.

"I cant believe that all this time *you* were 'Madmax'! I thought for sure it had to be like a professional or something." Dustin shook his head in astonishment.

"I call playing next!" Lucas fished a quarter from his pocket and slammed it down on the small control shelf. The boys crowded around Max, watching astonished as her score crept higher and higher.

"Uh Hey El!" Mike mumbled, hoping to pick back up on their banter from yesterday.

El froze, eyes widened in uncertainty. What should she say? How should she respond? Why did he make her feel like such a bumbly idiot. It was so easy to scowl and pretend not to care around other people, so why was it so hard with him? Then she noticed Max looking at her quizzically out of the corner of her eye and El realized she had just been staring at Mike without actually saying anything. She cleared her throat and threw her signature 'why are you talking to me, loser?' face at him. Complete with raised eyebrows and a skeptical grimace.

'Yeah perfect. That will throw him off!'

It certainly did throw Mike off. What was her problem? She had been nice enough yesterday but she kept looking at him like he was an alien. Did he have something on his face? Was his hair out of place from the bike ride? And most importantly why did he care what she thought so damn much?

'She is staring at you because she think you are a dork.' He mentally kicked himself for being so worked up. He just couldn't really help the way she made him feel.

"Do you play anything, El?" Will asked with a whole hearted grin.

El shook her head. "No i'm really bad." She chuckled dryly.

"I bet you just haven't found your game yet." Will said optimistically.

"No, she really does stink." Max giggled, still a blur of motion over the controls.

El looked from Will to Mike, and when their eyes locked she felt herself blush. "Yeah." She sighed.

"Damn it!" Max hollered, slamming her fist on the machine.

"Ha! I guess it's my turn then." Lucas grinned, pushing Max out of the way and inserting his coin. The game chimed back to life and Max crossed her arms tightly over her chest, the smallest smile peeking out from under her forced scowl.

"They are going to be at this all day." Will groaned. "Why don't we find you a game you actually like, El."

Els eyes lit up. Will may have been the quietest, but he seemed to be the most friendly. "If you want to take on the challenge."

"Between Mike and I, i'm sure we teach you to play something!" Will elbowed Mike in the ribs and smirked at him. Mike whispered something at the smaller boy but the sound was lost in the 8-bit blasting noises and jingles coming from around the arcade. Mike looked up at El with an unreadable look on his face, and El suddenly felt crushingly embarrassed.

Mike and Will pushed their way past Dustin and Max, who were still cheering for Lucas, and El slowly followed. They walked to a slightly quieter corner of the arcade where the games were less frequented.

"Okay why don't you try this one?" Will pointed to the Galaga machine. "It's almost impossible to suck at Galaga."

El nodded and dug around in her pocket for one of the quarters she always brought in case Max ran out. She slipped it into the machine and the screen chirped and flashed to the title screen. The familiar chime sounded off as El grabbed the joystick and readied her fingers over the buttons.

It was pretty simple. Move left and right and shoot at the little spaceships, but she just couldn't get the hang of it. She jerked the controller back and forth a little to quickly, accidentally putting her directly into the line of fire. She hit the 'fire' button to seldom, never managing to hit a target. Before any time had passed, her own pixelated spaceship blinked out of existence. She let out a small groan, and feeling the boys eyes watching her from behind, she felt her face redden with dismay.

"I told you I'm terrible." She grimaced, turning around to face the boys.

"No your not that terrible!" Will tried to say positively. "You just-

"You just need to slow down." Mike interrupted. "Here let me show you."

Mike walked forward and stuck another coin in the machine. The opening song sounded off again and he shifted to the side so that El could watch too. He grabbed the controller and began right away.

"You need to wait until they stop flying so you know where to aim." He swiftly shifted the ship left directly under a cluster of enemies. "Then you fire rapidly." He hit the little red button over and over again, wiping out the cluster in second.

"Okay now you move the joystick, and i'll work the buttons." He let go of the little knob and El hesitantly took it. She did as he said,

waiting until the ships stilled and then zoomed right underneath them. Mike fired at them again and cleared them out.

It didn't take long for her to get the hang of it, and it was pretty satisfying to watch her score gradually increase in the corner. It was even more satisfying when she shot the last ship, causing it explode, and the bold 'Stage 2' indicator scrolled across the screen. Will and Mike gave her a small cheer the way they had done for Max earlier and it made her feel marvelous.

"See you aren't that bad!" Will patted her back as she blasted through more and more zooming ships.

As she cleared another stage their cheering got louder. Soon Mike let go of the buttons and let El do the firing as well. As the enemy ships got faster, so did she, learning their patterns and working over the controls without even looking. She cleared the 3rd stage, and then the 4th, and the 5th, until the ships were buzzing too fast and too numerous for her to keep track. A bug looking, spacecraft dive bombed directly into her, killing her last life in a fiery explosion. El watching the screen turn black and declare her game over.

She turned around slowly, that same feeling of chagrin filling her, But the boys were still cheering.

"That was so good!" Will beamed. "Did you have fun?"

"I did actually." El smiled and tucked a loose curl back behind her ear. She looked from Will to Mike, who face was turned up in admiration. "Thank you for helping me."

"That's what friends are for." Mike muttered, turning the lightest shade of pink.

'Friends!? Did he say we are friends? We hardly know each other!' El screamed in her own head, unable to look away from the red faced boy. She felt her heart do flip-flops in her chest. This was too much. The way Mike made her feel was scary. She hasn't let herself get too close to anyone, aside from Max, in a really long time and she wasn't about to start now.

'What do i do? What do i say? What would Max say?'

"You think I would be friends with a loser like you?" She chuckled dryly. The words felt sour on her tongue. Like they didn't belong there. To anyone else she would be able to tell them off like it was no big deal, but this was so much different and she regretted her words almost instantly.

Mikes face fell into a look of puzzled disappointment. Why would she say that? They were just having fun a second ago.

'Because that's what girls like that do. She doesn't want to be your friend because you are the world biggest loser!' He told himself.

People talk about her like she is an anomaly, like she is from another planet, and its because she kind of is. Hawkins is so small, and everyone has known everyone else their entire lives. Everyone acts the same, talks the same, hangs out with the same people, because it's all they have ever known. But here is El, and she has the experiences of living in a different place, a wildly more interesting place, and the mysticism of being new. El was cool. Cooler than all of the other girls at school, and certainly too cool to be hanging out with Mike Wheeler. But she had invited him here, didn't she? And despite everything she was fun to hang out with, this is just her personality, she just isn't nice. You don't wear all black and listen to music that is basically just screaming if you are a nice girl.

'But she is nice! At least sometimes...' The strange second part of him spoke up. The part of him that used only his feelings, and not his logic.

So she is cool and nice. Great.

She is cool, and nice, and funny, and interesting, and beautiful, and-

'Wait. beautiful!? Did I just think she was beautiful? Get it together Wheeler! She wears her hair like a boy and wears leather jackets and smears black crud around her eyes!

Black crud that makes her Hazel eyes look deep and wide, like a doe. And those leather jackets do look pretty badass. And her short hair

frames her face in the cutest way, and when a loose curl falls in her face I could just die!

God Wheeler you are an absolute sucker.'

Mikes heart fluttered and El giggled at him. They had been staring at each other for kind of a long time. She finally turned around to watch Will playing Mrs. Pacman.

'So she is cute, and nice, and funny, and cool, and badass, and exciting to hang out with. Fine.

But she doesn't have to stare at me all the time! And she doesn't have to play these weird sometimes nice, sometimes rude games! I know that im just some dweeb but she doesn't have to rub it in my face!'

That strangely temperamental part of Mike began to bubble up in his gut. Maybe he had a tiny crush on El, and knowing that she would never feel the same way made him feel sick. He didn't like being made fun of, and he certainly didn't like the fact that El was so damn hard to read. She had been friendly, and invited him here, and then she was cold and distant. El turned around to look at him again and creased her forehead in confusion when Mike was still staring at her.

That was enough for him. He grabbed his backpack off the floor and stormed away. Weaving around other huddled and hollering teenagers until he made his way outside. He sat down on the curb outside near his bike, not knowing whether to leave or to stay.

The door open behind him, and thinking it might be El coming to tell him off for acting like such a spaz he didn't turn around. The person circled around him, coming to stand in front of him and when he finally looked up he was shocked to see it was Max who had followed him.

"What's your damage, Wheeler?" She sighed crossing her arms and towering above him.

"Nothing." He huffed, hugging his knees to his chest and doing a very bad job of looking unphased.

"Okay well you basically plowed into me on your mad dash to get

outside so why don't you stop lying." She said aggressively, but with a hint of actual concern.

Mike looked up at the red headed girl. He had known, or rather known of, Max for a while now. He knew she was more tough than most of the jocks in their grade, and that she wasn't someone you wanted to lie too. He sighed and leaned back on his palms to look up at her.

"It's just El..." He started, hoping that she would somehow understand everything and leave him alone. Instead she just raised an eyebrow askancely. "She just... It was really fun hanging out with you two yesterday and I have never done anything like that before and-"

"You don't say." Max interrupted him with a snort.

"Yeah... anyway and she invited us here today and I thought it was really cool of her because girls like her dont talk to guys like me." Mike started to rush his words together as the feelings came pouring out of him, not in anyway helping is case to not seem like a spaz. "And I think she is really cool and nice and funny! But then I get here and she doesn't even talk to me and ignores me when I talk to her and she keeps staring at me and I know that you guys probably make fun of us behind our backs and-"

"Mike!" Max yelled, suddenly he realized that she had been trying to get his attention for awhile. He shut his gaped mouth and looked up at her. "Are you seriously that moronic?"

"What!?" He half yelled in surprise.

"First of all we don't make fun you behind your backs. You guys are nerds but that's fine who gives a shit? If i'm going to tease you it's going to be to your face. And secondly, El probably didn't talk to you and was staring at you because she likes you!" Max was yelling by the end of her rant, and was gesturing wildly with her arms.

"She... she does?" Everything else that Max had said flew out of his mind the moment she told him Els feelings.

"Yeah. Like a lot. Like she actually wouldn't shut up about it." Max

rolled her eyes. A slow smile spread over Mike's face until he was grinning like an idiot. "And the only reason I am telling you this is because you obviously like her too and I'm tired of hearing her talk about it and I'm not going to deal with you too acting like weirdos around each other when we hang out all the time."

"But she is way too cool for me..." Mike muttered mostly to himself.

"Yeah you're right." Max teased taking a seat on the curb next to him. "I don't really get it personally but to each its own I guess." She smirked crookedly and punched him in the arm. He rubbed the spot tenderly and chuckled, before he realized something that Max had said.

"Wait. Did you say we are going to all hang out all the time?" Now it was Mike's turn to smirk. Max's eyes went wide as she realized what she had done. The great and mighty Max saying something nice and admitting she wanted to hang out with dorks? Couldn't be.

"That's... that's not what I meant!" She backtracked.

"Oh but I think it is! Admit you had fun with us yesterday!"

"Never!" She crossed her arms but she laughed.

"Admit it or else!" Mike taunted.

"Or else what Wheeler? You gonna bore me to death with a math lesson?" She snorted.

"Or else I'm going to tell Lucas that you like him!" He pointed an accusing finger at her and sneered. Max's eyes went even wider.

"How... how did you-" She was astonished. How did he pick up on it? She was so careful!

"I might be oblivious about my own love life, but I'm not stupid."

Max reeled back and punched him in the arm again, harder this time. He yelped at the pain grabbed at his arm.

"Well you actually must be stupid because it's not true! And if you

ever say anything I am going to murder you!" Her voice was harsh and angry but Mike could hear the desperation. He really had cracked her secret wide open and she was scared.

"Okay okay I wont say anything! But you can't tell El that I like her and you still have to admit that we are friends."

"Deal." She stuck out her hand for Mike to shake and he did, despite the already forming soreness in his bicep. "We are friends or whatever."

"Good." Mike used their locked hands to pull himself back up to his feet. "Now let's go back inside. I want to watch you kick Lucas's ass on Dig Dug."

"Way ahead of you." Max smiled and opened the door for them to walk inside.

The rest of the gang was already congregated around the machine when they walked inside. El looked at Mike with concern but he smiled at her reassuringly and stood next to her, not at all minding it when she stared at him. Lucas and Max continued their marathonic battle for victory, which Max ultimately won. All in all it was a great day. Mike felt a strange sense of connection with these two girls, like they were meant to be members of the party despite all of their differences. It just felt right.

And when El leaned against the Dig Dug machine and smiled up at him with those dark rimmed Hazel eyes, that felt right too.

4. 4) At War with Myself

Hey Everyone! Thank you all for your wonderful comments, it honestly fills my heart with such joy reading them!

In this chapter we start to see more of El's past, and it starts to get kind of dark. But dont worry! There is still plenty of fluff to go around!

Hope you Enjoy.

Allie xxx

November 15th, 1987

When El said goodbye to her old life, she had left everything behind and not looked back. She thought she could just drop everything and start over, with a new family, in a new town, at a new school, and a new outlook. She was right for the most part, but one thing she didn't account for were the nightmares.

God the *nightmares*.

It was like her own brain was betraying her. Every night she would go to sleep and be forced to relive everything that she had gone through. Being passed around from home to home, every abusive foster parents, every meal she missed, every time she had been abandoned and left alone to fend for herself.

She lost count, after awhile, of all of the people and places she had met. All of their faces began to blur together into one ugly scowl of resentment and hatred. And in her dreams that same face taunted her, and chased her, and made her feel like the scum of the earth. She heard their voices, telling her that she wasn't good enough, that no one would ever love her. That she was doomed to spend her life unwanted and forgotten about.

These dreams always put her in a haze for the days that followed. Like a black cloud of self hatred and fear that she couldn't escape.

The Therapist Hop made her see had told her it was normal, and that after a while it would go away, but that didn't make it any easier.

One more than one occasion her sobbing had woken Hopper up from his room down the hall, he always tried his best to console her, but some things are just too painful to leave in the past, they just haunt you forever.

Tonight was different though. Instead of being woken up by her adoptive father gently holding her and telling her it would be okay, she woke up to complete and utter silence. She jolted upright, and tried to listen for the sounds of Hoppers breathing down the hallway, but there was nothing. No TV downstairs, no shuffling in the kitchen, no footsteps in the bathroom. It was strange, and unsettling, and it was far too reminiscent of all of the times this had happened in the past.

Waking up alone in a house you barely recognize, with no one around to hold you.

She swung her legs out from under her thick quilt into the cool night air. She tiptoed across her room and opened the door, not wanting to make a sound. She made her way to the staircase and listened hard for the usual sounds of the TV blaring some late night talk show below, but there was only silence in reply. She took a deep breath and descended the stairs.

She felt the breath leave her body when she saw his keys were still hanging up on the tiny hook next to his hat. *He's still here.* She walked into the living room.

She could see his outline, wrapped in pulsing blue light from the TV screen. He was sitting in his usual chair, but instead of watching the program, he had set it on silent, and he was resting his head in his hand, the way he did when he was upset.

"Hop?" She said after a few seconds. Her voice so hoarse it was hardly more than a whisper.

Jim didn't say anything, instead he just stuck his arm out and waved El over. She complied, rounding his chair to face him. He had been

crying, his skin was red and puffy and his eyes were badly bloodshot. She had never seen him cry before, he was always so strong.

"What's wrong?" Her own voice caught in her throat as if she had been the one crying.

He said nothing again, but he pulled her into a bear hug, holding her tightly as she curled into his lap. It was strange, but it also felt completely necessary. No one had held her, or hugged her, or cradled her in years, but it was something she didn't know she needed until tears started rolling down her cheeks.

They stayed that way for a long time. Both silent, the only noise spilling quietly from the TV in the corner. Jim rubbed her head, her hair was a mess of loose curls from her shower the night before. It was rare that she didn't have them slicked back and he always messed with them when he got the chance.

"I hope you know that I care about you more than anyone else in the world." He finally said. His voice even more gravely than usual.

She pulled away from the hug to look at him, for the first time, finally seeing what he looked like when he cried. She could hear the sincerity in his voice, and read it in his eyes, but it was hard for her accept. "Why?" It was the only thing she could think to say.

"Because you needed someone to take care of you. Because you were all alone but you still acted so tough" He chuckled despite his tears. "And because while I thought I was just doing my job, just doing the right thing, I needed someone to take care of. I needed a reason to be a better person." His voice was full of guilt and remorse. He sounded so vulnerable compared to how calloused he usually was.

With that she started crying harder. Her small frame shaking with her sobs. He hugged her closer and rocked her gently the way he used to with his own daughter.

"I just hope you know how much I love you, Kid. Even if it takes you the rest of your life to believe. I love you."

El hugged her father tighter. His words were hard to swallow,

because not long ago she wouldn't have been able to believe him. But now that they were all each other had, she knew she had to start the process of forgiving herself for all of the things she blamed herself for, and move on. When everyone leaves you, you start to assume it's your fault, but Jim never let her think for a second that it was.

"I know Jim. I love you too."

November 20th, 1987

The next week flew by.

Max's evil plan had gone off without a hitch. Thompson cancelled his classes for two days while he and the janitor cleaned up the mess. They had no leads as to who the perpetrators were because, after all, he was the most hated teacher in school.

Max and El started spending more and more time with the Geek Team, or the 'Party' as they called it. Max, Dustin and Lucas formed an unlikely bond and hung out almost every chance they got. They often rode around together, the boys on their bikes and Max on her board, to the arcade after school. Rumor has it that Max even went with them to the library one day so Dustin could show her his favorite book about the history of practical jokes.

El and Will bonded pretty quickly too. It turns out that little Byers had a pretty expansive music taste.

"I should have known!" El had told Will after finding his The Clash mix in his backpack. "Jonathan complimented me on my Talking Heads shirt on the first day of school. He was like the first person to ever talk to me here."

Then began a daily routine of gushing over new albums and songs, and debating the merits of one band over another. They made each other mixtapes and often walked to and from the classes they shared, squishing their heads together to listen to El's dinky headphones.

The only one who seemed out of place was Mike. Ever since Max told him the way El felt, a concept he still had trouble believing, he found

it really hard to be around with her without turning into a big dope. He was almost jealous of Will's connection with her, but ultimately he was just happy Will had found someone he had so much in common with.

It was a grouping that rattled the entire High School social ladder. Could scary punk girls really be friends with scrawny nerds? Could brainiacs really stand hanging around cigarette smoking, thick-skulled, freaks? It was weird, that was for sure, but it didn't really start to freak anyone out until the first day that they all sat together at lunch.

"Holy shit are they coming to eat with us!?" Dustin spat as the two girls, lunch trays in hand, slowly made their way across the cafeteria.

"Why wouldn't they? They are our friends aren't they?" Mike said, pushing his gross mushy peas around on the plastic tray.

"Well yeah! But sitting with someone at lunch is a way bigger deal than just hanging out in between classes. Once you eat lunch with someone you are socially cemented together for life!"

"Stop being so dramatic." Lucas flicked Dustin's ear. "I'm just glad they aren't eating out behind the dumpster like usual. *That's* what's weird."

The girls walked over, faking obliviousness to the blatant stares from around the room, and plopped down at the boys table. Max taking a seat next to Lucas, and El squeezing herself in between Will and Mike.

"So what are we doing today?" Max said with a mouthful of bread.

"What do you mean?" Will asked.

"It's Friday, as in the weekend, as in no school so we need to do something fun."

"We could go to the arcade!" Lucas chimed.

"Ugh no we do that like everyday and I'm out of money." Max groaned. The other boys nodded and mumbled something about

being broke too.

"Okay well... We could go to the library." Dustin contemplated.

"I mean I guess, but that hardly sounds like an exciting weekend." Max rolled her eyes.

Mike thought about all of the things that might be fun to do, but he figured that most of them were too dorky for El and Max to want to be a part of. He looked over at El and watched her passively stab at her food. Mostly just mixing it around rather than eating it.

"Everything okay?" He asked her quietly. It's not like the other could hear over Dustin and Max's bickering anyway.

"Huh?" She looked up at him, suddenly snapped back to reality. "Oh yeah. Everything is fine I just... i'm failing geometry and my dad is totally going to freak out on me. Mrs. Lawrence asked me to stay after class and everything. I doubt i'll be able to do anything this weekend."

"Oh that really sucks." He mused. Mike had never failed anything in his life, and he could only imagine the wrath of his mother if he ever did. He had always enjoyed math in all of its forms, he excelled at it. He was even Mrs. Lawrence's star pupil, a title that earned him a lot of torment.

"Are you hearing this shit El!?" Max hollered from across the table. El jumped from the startle of being yelled at and looked up. "They told me there is a cool junk yard on a hill! It has a bunch of old broken down cars and TV's and stuff!"

"That sounds cool." El smiled with a slight nod. "But I don't think I can hang out today."

"Well your loss then, i'm totally going to smash in some windows." Max high-fived Dustin and Lucas and they planned their entire trip.

The rest of the day went by in a fog for El. The emotional interaction she had with Hopper just a few days before had put her in a weird headspace. She really was learning to love him, even if it terrified her. He was goofy, and protective, and above all else he was trying.

So she wanted to try too.

El had always been great with anything English related. When she didn't have anyone to play with or talk to, books became her best friends. So while she had an A in English Lit., and in her creative writing class, math was another story. She hated it. Numbers made no sense to her. Not the way words did. But, she had promised herself to stay out of detention, and to get her grades up, and if that meant suffering through after school study sessions with her teacher then so be it.

After her final class of the day, she made the long walk of shame back to Mrs. Lawrence's classroom and waved goodbye to Max, Dustin, and Lucas who were all going off to the junkyard.

"Good afternoon Ms. Hopper." Lawrence said from behind her romance novel. "Why don't you take a seat while we wait for your tutor to arrive."

"Tutor?" El gaped. Her heart started racing at the thought of having to spend the next three hours with some asshole, mouth breathing, brainiac who would no doubt belittle and talk down to her the entire time.

"Yes dear. Here he comes now."

El swiveled around to watch her dreaded mentor walk through. But instead of some rude, gossiping stranger it none other than;

"Mike!?" El's mouth fell open, and then turned into a wide grin. Three hours alone with Mike in the quiet library? That didn't sound too bad at all.

"Mr. Wheeler has the highest grade of all my students" Mrs. Lawrence beamed, standing up from her desk with a stack of papers that she handed to Mike. "This is everything Ms. Jane needs to get caught up on. I know it's a lot but if anyone can help her it's you."

"Yeah no problem, it's my pleasure." Mike smiled coyly at El and she blushed.

The two of them walked slowly toward the school's library where a

couple of other students were studying. It was mostly empty and really quite. They found a private corner with two cozy chairs and a small table between them and set up the stacks of papers, sharp pencils, and textbooks. El and Mike couldn't stop stealing quick glances at each other.

El pulled her legs up into her chair so she was criss-cross, and leaning over her hardly used textbook. Mike noticed the tiny doodles all over the tips of her converse, and the way she nervously picked at her chipped black nail polish. When Mrs. Lawrence had asked him to tutor someone after school he had practically jumped out of his skin, knowing it would be El. And now he got to watch the way her nose wrinkled in confusion at problems she didn't understand, and the way she rubbed the bridge of her nose the way he had seen Chief Hopper do whenever he had to come to the school to break up a fight.

"So..." Mike started, remembering a key piece of information that Mrs. Lawrence had told him. El looked up, her doe eyes expectant. "Jane?"

El's wide eyes somehow shot open wider and her mouth dropped open into a half surprised, half smiling, glare. "Do not call me that!" She slammed her textbook closed and pointed a finger at him. He couldn't help but laugh.

"Why not? Jane is a good name." He snickered.

"Oh my god no its not! It's a name for a grandma!" She rubbed her temples. "I haven't gone by Jane since I was like 6. It's not me."

"Well where does El come from then?"

"It was a nickname an old friend gave me a long time ago. Its short for Eleven." She shrugged, her cheeks turning a brilliant shade of pink. Eleven had been her bed number at the massive foster home she stayed at. Everyone called each other by their bed numbers, or their home cities. Keeping a level of unfamiliarity between each other, because they knew nothing was permanent.

"Eleven? Like the number?" His nose crinkled in confusion.

"Its... kind of a long story." El's smile faded as she glanced at her shoes.

"Well I think Jane is cute." He smiled at her. His freckles rising and falling on his cheeks.

El's heart constricted and her stomach twisted itself into little buzzing knots, and just like that, she was grinning again. He was so nice, and sweet, and adorable! It made her feel like her protective walls were coming down and it horrified her.

'God I am such a sucker.'

He was still staring at her and her heart only beat faster.

'Shit what would Max do? What would Max say? Max wouldn't be a little coward.'

"Well I think you're cute." She said, turning her nose up just slightly the way Max always did. Mike's eyes flew open and now it was his turn to redden and bury his face in his hands.

"Lets... lets just study okay?" He said under his breath with an embarrassed grin.

El opened her book again and they started tackling one assignment after another. Mike really was great at geometry, and he was even good at explaining it in a way that made sense. A couple of times he had shifted to the very edge of his seat so that their knees were touching. He would lean over the book in her lap and point to various problems on the page and simplify them for her. She loved watching the way he pushed up the sleeves of his long polo when he got invested in explaining a problem, and the way he bit his lips when he focused. She was actually having fun while learning!

Every time she looked up from her notes, the sight of him made her head swim. She couldn't quite figure it out. Why did he make her feel this way? It was all so new and unfamiliar. They had very little in common, at least from what she knew about him, and if it weren't for Lucas and Dustin wanting to be daredevils all of the sudden then they would *never* have hung out in the first place. Mike was painfully

dorky, and painfully different than anyone El had ever imagined herself being with, and yet she imagined being with him all the time. What was it about him that drew her in?

For Mike it was much of the same. El was definitely the last person he ever expected to be making heart-eyes at in the Library. She certainly wasn't the type of girl that his parents would want him bringing home (although they would probably be happy with him bringing *any* girl home). But everything about her fascinated him. At first it seemed like maybe it was just the fact that she was the first girl to ever really talk to him, or laugh at his jokes, or invite him to hang out. He assumed it would wear off and she would become just his good friend the way Max was, but the longer they spent time together the more intense his feelings became. Suddenly it was like everything she did filled him with fascination and adoration.

She was a mystery that he wanted to solve. He closed his book and stretched, feeling a bit stiff from leaning over his notes for so long.

"El?" He asked tentatively, wanting to get to the bottom of at least *some* part of all this. She looked up at him curiously with those warm doe eyes of hers. "What... what is your deal?" He wasn't really sure how to put it, but he knew that that probably wasn't it.

"My deal?" El asked raising her eyebrows and looking somewhat offended.

"Shit I didn't mean it like that... I just mean like..." He thought for a second, wanting to find better words this time. "I have just never met anyone like you before, and I never thought someone like you would want to talk to someone like me, let alone hang out with me. And I have never been to Chicago so I don't know what people look like or act like there but you are just so different from what I thought you would be." By the end of his speech he was mumbling and speeding through his words.

El laughed and closed her book. "Haven't you ever heard the saying 'Don't Judge a book by its cover?'" She waved her textbook at him. She was still smiling, so that was a good sign, wasn't it?

"Well yeah of course I have I just mean-"

"You just mean that you thought I was going to be some angry, bitter, psycho who would rather kick your teeth than be seen talking to a nerd." El interrupted, still smiling but also still completely dejected.

"No no not at all!" Mike back-peddled. El raised her eyebrows and he caved. "Okay yeah maybe a little."

"Well there are a lot of things you don't know about me." El crossed her arms and leaned back in her chair. "I might be a little bitter, and a little angry but you would be too if you had seen the things that I have seen. But i'm not mean, at least not to people who don't deserve it."

Mike felt like an idiot. "You're right. I don't really know anything about you, but I would like too."

She eyed him carefully. He was getting way too close for comfort with her emotions. "We are just from completely different planets okay? You wouldn't get it."

Now it Mikes turn to be offended. He may not share her experiences but he considered himself a fairly empathetic person. "You don't know that I wouldn't get it. There is a lot you don't know about me either."

"Let's see about that." El snorted, sitting forward to look directly at him. "I'll bet your parents are still together, and super in love. I bet your dad has a good job and makes a ton of money so your mom gets to stay home all day baking cakes. I bet when your dad comes home at night your mom drops everything and hands him a beer and rubs his feet. I bet they love and support you and give you everything you have ever wanted." Her eyes were like daggers, piercing through him.

Mike scoffed and shook his head. "Now who is judging who? I'll have you know that my dad is a bastard. I *wish* my parents would just split up already because they may as well be complete strangers. My dad thinks I am a loser and my mom tries her best, I guess, but they both basically don't pay any attention to me." He was raising his voice slightly, talking about his family always put him on edge. El just stared at him silently, clearly not expecting the outburst.

"I'm the only boy, and my dad wanted so badly for me to be into sports and be all athletic like he was in school, but I'm not and I know he resents me for it. So yeah, maybe I have had a good comfortable life with two parents in a nice house, and maybe my parents do love me but they definitely don't like me." Mike slumped back in his chair with his arms crossed tightly against himself.

El softened, realizing that all of that was probably really hard for him to say. She put a hand on his knee despite him looking away from her. "Look I'm sorry. I didn't mean to come off like a bitch, okay? I know what it's like to have an asshole father. Believe me."

Mike turned towards her and dropped his arms into his lap. El was still holding his knee but she was staring solemnly at the ground. "Is... Is that why Hopper adopted you? Because of your dad?" He asked in almost a whisper.

El took a deep breath and nodded. She could feel her protective force field falling down around her, and as much as it terrified her, it also felt like maybe it was the right thing to do. Maybe it was better to talk about it.

"Yeah. Kind of. It's a lot... that I don't really want to get into." She pulled her hand from Mike's leg to play with the frays on her shoe laces nervously.

"You don't have to tell me if you don't want to. But I'm here if you need to talk." He patted her arm gently and it made her smile.

"Thanks. It's just hard to think about." She took a sobering breath and gained her composure. "I was really little so I don't remember very much, so I guess that's good. But before Hopper found me I was living on the streets with some other foster kids. I looked up to them a lot and they showed me all about music, and art, about feminism, about how corrupt society is, and the things we can do to change it for better. We ran away and it was scary but it felt really exciting to be part of something for the first time. We were like a family.."

"Do you miss them?" Mike asked quietly.

El shrugged.. "Sometimes. But they bailed on me too. That's when

Hopper found me, and I am really grateful for that." She grinned crookedly. She had only ever really opened up to Max about any of that, and it wasn't even scratching the surface of what she was holding onto. But saying it all out loud made it easier somehow, like it wouldn't weigh on her so heavily.

"Well i'm glad you are here now, and that you have a family, and new friends." He smiled at her, leaning in closer, their faces only a few inches apart. "Because we would never leave you or hurt you."

"You can't know that." She dropped her gaze from his to her hands in her lap.

"I promise." He grabbed her hands in his and squeezed them lightly. "Our parties number one rule is that friends don't lie." He tilted his head under hers so that she was forced to look at him, and could see that he meant it. "And besides, if I can put up with Lucas and Dustin after all of these years then i'm sure you will be no problem at all." He flashed a silly grin at her and it made her chuckle.

"Okay then. It's a promise." She pulled from his grasp and held her hand out firmly for him to shake. He did so sternly and they both giggled, turning red in the face.

Usually El didn't care about someone else's promise, because no one had ever kept their word to her before, but something about Mike seemed so trustworthy. She still had a difficult time with even the idea of opening up. She still blamed herself for so much, and with Mikes kindness and honesty, it just felt like too much. Like she didn't deserve it. Like he would, at any moment, realize that she was a mess, and he and the rest of the party were far better off without her. That they would leave her too, but at least she was willing to try. Mike made her want to try.

Three long dreaded hours had flown by in only minutes, and before either of them knew it, the Librarians as informing them that the library would be closing.

"So did any of that help?" Mike asked as he shoved his notebooks back into his backpack.

"Yeah actually, it helped a lot. I think I can probably finish the rest of this over the weekend." She smiled at him and stood up, slinging her bag over her shoulder.

They both made their way outside into the chilly November evening. The sun was still about an hour from setting, but everything was vaguely tinted a pale shade of autumn orange. They both stood in awkward silence for a few minutes, neither wanting to say goodbye just yet.

Mike reached up and rubbed the back of his neck, looking at the ground. "I um... I had fun hanging out with you." His pale freckles were awash in red blush.

"I had fun hanging out with you too." El punched his arm playfully. "And if I need any help with my homework this weekend, i'll call you."

"Sounds good." He beamed, smiling wider than he meant to. "Okay well... I guess I will see you later?"

"Yeah see you around." El hugged her denim jacket tighter around herself and prepared for the walk home. Mike turned around and shuffled off towards the bike rack, when El remembered something. "Hey Mikey?" She hollered.

He whipped around so quickly that he tripped over his own feet, making her giggle. "Yeah what's up?" He semi-jogged back over to her.

She dug into her backpack and pulled out her Walkman. She pressed the little eject button and the tape deck popped open. "Here, why don't you listen to this over the weekend and report back to me with what you think on Monday. That way you have homework too." She grinned.

"Yeah sounds awesome!" He blurted. She giggled again.

"Okay, Wheeler. See ya." She waved goodbye one last time and turned away, walking up the long hill towards home. She reached reflexively for the pack of cigarettes in her pocket and lit one, letting

warm smoke waft into the fall air around her. It was one of the first times in a long time that she wasn't using it to calm her nerves, because the nerves she felt were strangely comforting.

Mike held the little plastic tape in his hands and felt warm blush cross his face for what must have been the hundredth time that evening.

5. 5) Authority-Shmority

Hey Everyone! Thank you for your comments, you will never know how deeply touched I am by every sweet thing you guys say.

November 30th, 1987

If there was one thing that El learned while growing up in the city, it was always question

authority.

Back in the group home, El had befriended a wild child named Kali. They became bunk mates, partners in crime, and sisters. Kali was a bit older, and she took El under her wing. She was assertive, and demanded attention simply by entering a room. El would never forget the way she walked straight up to her on her first day while she cried alone on her bunk.

'Don't waste your time crying over people who don't deserve it. You are better than them, and that's why you're here.'

From that moment on they were inseparable. Kali gave her the nickname El, but they soon called each other by their first names (and were the only foster kids to do so) because they knew that they would be in each others lives forever. She showed all of the best places in the city, she taught her how to steal candy without getting caught, all about the patriarchy, and the punk rock gospel.

When Kali got a bit older, she found a group of like minded people living on the streets and she convinced El to to run away and join them. For awhile it seemed like a good decision. They drove around in a cozy van, they slept in an abandoned warehouse, and protected each other. In a lot of ways, it was the most exciting time in El's life. They would vandalize buildings and train cars, they stole from war criminal oil tycoons to give back to the poor, they went to shows and spread their message everywhere they could. There was a political revolution happening on the streets, and El had a front row seat.

That was until her new found gang decided to take it too far.

Kali wanted revenge on the people responsible for the abuse she had been through, the abuse that they had *all* been through. While her anger was fully justified, it just felt wrong. It started with robbery, then moved to forgery, then arson, and before long even that wasn't enough to satisfy Kali's rage. She wanted them dead.

It was when they broke into one man's home, that El finally decided enough was enough. She watched the way he struggled and begged for his life while he stared down the barrel of Kali's gun. She saw the terror in the eyes of his daughters in the next room, and she saw the lust for blood in Kali's. So she bailed. She caught a late night bus back to the warehouse they hid out in, and waited for them to come home. She knew they would be pissed, but at least her conscious would be clear knowing she wasn't around to watch Kali pull the trigger.

But they never came back.

She spent the night alone. Then another, and another, until the days turned into weeks. She was out of food and nearly frozen to death by the time the cops raided the building. That's when Hopper found her, and that's when her new life started.

After that, it was a blur of hospital stays, legal documents, court rooms, and then packing up what little things she had and moving in with Hopper. He let her buy new clothes, and bought her her very own walkman, and when they moved to Hawkins she got to have her own room for the first time in her entire life. Her counselor had said it was a miracle that she was adjusting so well, and that most kids in her situation would be either junkies, psychopaths, or both.

But El was a fighter. She was strong, and she refused to let her past dictate her future. She resented Kali for leaving her, but she understood why. She was a traitor, and hardly any better than the criminals that Kali fought. But she would never forget the lessons Kali taught her, about sticking up for the little guy, fighting injustice, and defending your beliefs at all times. For El it wasn't just about being angry, or loud music, or ripped clothes, it was a mindset based on making change for the better no matter what the cost.

Even now in Hawkins, El's aggressive political attitude didn't change. Hawkins was painfully behind the times socially, and she wasn't about to let it slide. She rarely spoke up in class unless it was to tell off some sexist asshole in English, or argue the merits of women in history, or join in a heated political debate in social studies.

Or, as was the case today, telling her Gym teacher that is was, in fact, 'total bullshit' to make the girls scrub down the gym equipment in the musty old storage closet, while the boys got to run the track outside on one of the few nice days they had had in weeks.

"You should be grateful, girly." Sneered a very smug Mr. Meloney, a heavy set man with beady little eyes and permanent bad breath. "You get the easy end of the deal. Someone's gotta clean the equipment, and don't curse at me."

"But that is bullshit! I don't care about getting the 'easy' way out! It's not fair, or right! Why don't we *all* clean, and then we can all go outside after?" She hissed, raising her voice. Most of the boys in class groaned, it was just another one of the freak girls stupid rants, but several of the girls hollered their approval.

"I said not to curse at me! If I hear one more thing out of you it's going to be detention. Now why don't you go sit on the bleachers and fix your makeup, looks like you have a god damn black eye." He pointed a finger at her and several of the boys laughed.

She felt her blood start to boil, he had gone to far. She took a tentative step towards him and balled her fists. "I should give you a black eye." She hissed through her teeth, her rage welling up into her throat. She reeled back and spit at him. "Fucking pig."

Several of the girls behind her cheered. Mr. Maloney was a known creep. He made all of the girls feel uncomfortable and often treated them like garbage, clearly just because of their gender and his own sick issues. It was honestly a relief that someone like El started standing up to him.

"That is it Hopper!" He grabbed El's wrist and drug her out into the hallway, she squirmed but his grip was tight and it felt like it was going to leave a gnarly bruise. "Get your ass to the principal's office

before I kick it there."

She finally managed to jerk herself free and stomped to the front office of the school. She was going to be in deep shit when she got home but she couldn't help it. It was the right thing to do, and she wasn't about to let that perv slide.

She spent the rest of the period in the principal's office silently fuming as she was written up for detention, and Hopper was called.

At least her friends were supportive.

"You should have kicked him in the crotch." Dustin said with his mouth full of sandwich.

"Yeah! Or actually punched him that would have been great!" Lucas agreed laughing.

"He's lucky I didn't. I wanted to, but that probably would have gotten me expelled." El sighed.

"God he is such a creep." Max shuddered. "He totally checks out all of the girls when they jog. It's disgusting."

"He does!?" Mike and Will gasped in unison. El and Max both nodded with a grimace.

"That's what happens when you have a position of authority." El shrugged. "Absolute power corrupts absolutely. Even stupid gym teachers." She stabbed at her poor excuse for a salad, not really feeling hungry.

"What does that mean?" Dustin asked dumbfoundedly..

"It's a famous quote from British politician, Lord Acton." Max answered nonchalantly. The boys turned to her sharply as if she had just spoken another language. "What? El talks about this stuff a lot. I thought you guys were supposed to be the smart ones."

"It means that when you have authority you are likely to abuse it because no one can stop you. It's why most politicians are liars, and most teachers are assholes." El added.

They all nodded and mumbled in agreement. It was kind of funny, watching El slowly open their eyes to the underground political agenda.

But her cop father was another story.

She knew the entire walk home that she was going to get an earful when Jim got off work. Until then, she was going to listen to music as loud as her speakers would allow and let off some steam from her shitty day.

She was sitting on the couch reading a magazine when he got home. Her stereo was blasting The Runaways, so she didn't hear him pull up, or walk inside, or stomp into the living room until he was looming above her. She jolted upright when he stomped to her stereo and shut it off without a word.

"Hey!" She yelled.

"Don't hey me! I have told you a thousand times not to listen to that crap that loud." He was furious.

"God chill! I'm sorry, okay?" His tone, and her bad day put her in an argumentative mood.

"Chill? I get a call at work that you get detention and you want me to chill?"

"It wasn't my fault!"

"Oh it wasn't your fault huh? You call your teacher a 'fucking pig' and it wasn't your fault?" He was still towering above her.

"No! Because he was being a pig! He is a total perv and a dirtbag and I wasn't going to take any of his crap anymore!" She stood up, still much too short to be at his eye level, but staring daggers at him.

"Look, kid, you are in the real world now. And in the real world you can't just go around cursing and spitting at people like some kind of little street brat!"

"The real world!? As if I have been living some charmed fantasy life

up until this point!? Give me a break!" She felt angry tears brimming in her eyes.

"That girl you used to pal around with filled your head with a lot of garbage ideas! You need to grow up!" He grabbed her shoulders and shook her. "Grow the hell up!"

"Get the fuck off of me!" She ripped out of his grasp and stomped up to her room, but he was close on her heels. She turned to slam her door but he stuck his arm in just in time to catch it.

"Don't walk away from me when I am talking to you! This is exactly what i'm talking about. You like to play pretend that you are this angry punk but you just run away from your problems! You are never going to get anywhere in this world if you don't drop the act and own up to your mistakes." His words cut deep into her like a knife. He was right, all she ever did was run away.

Run away from her abusive father, run away from the foster home, run away from Kali, and run away to Hawkins. She wasn't tough at all, no matter how much makeup she hid under, no matter how thick her leather jacket was, or how strong her ideals were. Inside she was still just a scared little girl. So while he yelled at her, for the first time, she just stayed quiet and listened. Hot tears streamed down her face as she took his beratement.

"You are grounded for two weeks. That means no TV, no stereo-" He turned and ripped her boombox from the wall. "And no going out with your friends. You are going to go to school, and come home and study and get over this bullshit. Do I make myself clear?" He got in her face again and she turned to avoid his glare.

"I said, do I make myself clear!?" He yelled. She turned to face him, long streaks of black mascara running down her face.

"Yes." Her voice was like ice.

He said nothing as he turned around and slammed her door closed behind him, her stereo in hand. She flopped back on her bed and pulled a pillow over her face so she could scream into it. She wanted to badly to go downstairs and yell at him some more, she had so

much more to say, but she knew none of it would change anything.

So instead she just stared up at the ceiling for hours. Thinking over all of the things she hasn't let herself think about in a long time.

'Where is Kali? I hope she is okay. I'm sure she must hate me, but I would give anything to see her right now. No one understood me the way she did.'

All I ever do is run away. Run away so no one can leave me first. So no one realizes that I am worthless. Worthless and unlovable.'

It started getting dark, and as the sun set it became clear that Hopper wasn't going to be making dinner. She didn't want to see him anyway. She felt like she was going crazy. She jumped off her bed and stormed back and forth, the anxiety in her gut rising and pulsing, not letting her sit down. Usually she could just tune her feelings out with music, or a movie, or a long walk through town.

'That's it!'

She threw on a warm grey sweater and strapped on her favorite boots. She flipped the light in her room off so that he would think she was sleeping and she locked the door on her way out. She silently opened her window and perched herself on its edge, feeling the cool air wrap around her. Lucky for her there was a small potting shed just under window that she could use to jump onto, and from there it was only a slight drop to the ground. She set off in the direction of Max's house, wishing more than anything she had taken up her offer to learn how to skate. It wasn't too bad of a walk, but it was cold and dark.

'At least I don't have to worry about getting stabbed out here in the sticks.' She chuckled to herself, wrapping her arms tightly around herself and pressing forward.

It was a little after 10:00pm when she arrived at the Mayfield house. She could hear the usual sounds of Billy, Max's brother, and her step dad arguing inside, but luck for her, Max's bedroom light was on. She grabbed a handful of pebbles and tossed them up at the girls window.

A few second later Max was sticking her head out into the night air

and looked around the darkness.

"Lucas?" Max asked in a harsh whisper. El burst out laughing and stepped into the light.

"Sorry to disappoint you." El chortled. "Does he come throw rocks at your window often?"

"Ugh, no shut up!" Max rolled her eyes, blushing furiously. "Why are you here?"

"Hopper grounded me, so naturally I snuck out. Let's go to the park or something." El kicked the grass and smirked.

"Oh shit dude that sucks." Max shook her head. "Okay yeah let me get my jacket." her head disappeared from the window, and a few moments later she was back, tossing her skateboard out and jumping down from her window.

They walked to the nearby park, well, if you could call it a park. It was really just a few swings, a small set of rusty monkey bars, and a big dusty baseball diamond, but it was all they had available. Max and El jumped up on the swings, Max kicked off with great force, sending her soaring through the cool air. El just sat, kicking at the dirt and lighting up a cigarette.

"Max, why does everything suck so much?" El griped, exhaling softly into the air.

"No clue. It's like a global conspiracy." Max chuckled, her voice raising and lowering in volume as she zoomed back and forth.

"If by global conspiracy you mean thousands of years of patriarchy then yeah, pretty much." El leaned against the cold metal chain of her swing and took another long drag.

"Hey, I think I have an idea." Max said digging her feet into the dirt below and kicking up bark chips and dust, skidding to a stop.

"What's that?" El said exhaling another long breath of smoke.

"I'll bet the boys have never snuck out before." Her face was turned

up in the signature 'Madmax' devilish grin.

"So?"

"So let's get them to sneak out with us!"

"I doubt they will be down for that." El sighed, stifling the end of her cigarette against the chain.

"Please. Lucas and Dustin will do anything to prove they aren't dorks. Plus Will is kind of always up for anything, and I know seeing Mike would make you feel better!" Max swung sideways bumping into El. A faint smile flashed across El's face, and before she had time to think of a rebuttal Max was pulling her by the hand in the direction of the Sinclair house.

All it took was one well thrown pebble, and Max waving to get Lucas to climb down off of his roof and join the girls. He seemed practically giddy (and like this wasn't his first time scaling his roof to get down). He had his Supercom and he used it to call Mike and Dustin. Dustin called Will and within the span of less than half an hour, all six teenagers were congregated back at the park.

Max and Lucas decided to race each other to the top of the monkey bars. A challenge that Max quickly won with little effort. Her and Lucas got lost in conversation from their perch, giggling and whispers about who knows what as the rest of the party milled around the field.

Will and Dustin were deep in a debate about some X-men character, and running around the field reenacting scenes like proper geeks.

Mike and El made their way to the swings and seeing him really did make her feel better. Being around her friends always made her feel better because they were the first friends she had that didn't make her feel like she had to prove something just to be close with them. If anything it seemed the opposite. It was always the boys trying to show off and prove they weren't just small town nerds, and it was kind of endearing.

"Hey El?" Will asked from across the dirt playground. "Who do you

think is more likely to be a secret superhero? Henry Rollins or Glen Danzig?"

El snorted, surprised by the question. She admittedly didn't know a lot about superheroes, but she did know that the lead singers of Black Flag and The Misfits respectively were some of the toughest guys in the music scene.

"Definitely Danzig. He probably has like demon superpowers. Did you know he is only 5' 3"?"

"Holy crap really? That shorter than I am!" Will belly laughed.

"And just like you he is tiny but powerful." El giggled

Dustin and Mike watched them like they were speaking in tongues, but it was nice having someone to talk to about stuff like this. She never would have guessed she would find someone with decent music taste in farm country. Thank god for Will Byers.

After the riveting talk wore down, it became apparent that Will really was out of his comfort zone. So much for being 'up for anything'. As it got later, despite his clear discomfort, Will was pretending not to be freaked out by every noise, and car that drove past. And why he was asking for the hundredth time if they were '*sure* everything was going to be fine'.

"God yes Will! We aren't going to get in trouble!" Dustin sighed rubbing his brow. While everyone else seemed to be enjoying the thrill of being out after dark, the Byers boy was a nervous wreck.

"You can't know that! I'm just going to bike home before my mom or Jonathan knows i'm gone." Will zipped up his coat and hoisted his backpack over his shoulder.

"You shouldn't go home by yourself this time of night." Max hollered from her place on top of the monkey bars. "There are weirdos out this late." She snickered, throwing Will an unnerving expression.

"Really?" Will asked, gripping his bike handles and looking terrified.

"No not really, Max is just trying to scare you." Mike rolled his eyes,

throwing the giggling girl an accusing glare. "But it's probably more safe if I go with you." He reluctantly moved to stand up, but before he could, Dustin beat him to it.

"I'll go home with you. I live closer." He sighed, mounting his own Bike. He and Will clicked the small duct taped head lanterns on. "And besides, I don't want to be the fifth wheel."

"Um well, bye guys!" Will smiled, clearly relieved to be getting home.

"See you later, little Danzig." El chuckled.

Everyone watched in silence as the two boys peddled off, trying not to think about the implications of Dustin's 'fifth wheel' comment.

"Well alright!" Max hollered, jumping off of the monkey bars in a swift leap. "I want to walk around the track."

"I'll come with you!" Lucas said, a huge grin spreading across his face as he climbed down. His descent was just as graceful as hers, and in seconds he was jogging to keep up with Max as she sauntered towards the distant baseball diamond.

El and Mike watched them leave, and became aware of the silence hanging in the air.

"I guess they are probably going to like... Makeout or whatever." Mike chuckled nervously.

El giggled and nodded. "Yeah probably. You know earlier, when I knocked on her window, she thought I was Lucas. I think they do this a lot."

"Jeez." Mike rubbed his neck. "I guess that makes sense, I always thought Lucas would be the first one of us to..." He cut his sentence short, feeling suddenly overwhelmed with embarrassment.

"To what?" El asked curiously.

"To... you know..." He kicked at the dirt. "Like kiss a girl."

El turned to him sharply, eyes wide with surprise. "Wait... none of

you have ever kissed anyone?" She gaped.

Mikes face turned a deep scarlet and he cleared his throat nervously. "No not really. Dustin said that he kissed some girl at summer camp last year but I think he is full of shit. It's not like girls are really into the whole dork thing." He gestured to himself, forcing an awkward smile.

El was genuinely shocked. Granted, she had never kissed anyone either, but that was mostly by choice. She looked at him and searched for the right thing to say, but she just found it so inconceivable.

'How could anyone not want to kiss Mike? Dork or not.'

"Well it's not like a big deal or anything, to not be kissed." She cringed at her own words. "It's probably not even that great."

"Yeah. Probably not." They both chuckled dryly in the tension of the situation. Then what she said dawned on him. "Wait, you have never kissed anyone either?"

"Nope. No one has ever been cool enough to deserve it." El giggled. It wasn't the entire truth, a big part of her never having dated anyone lay in the fact that she was terrified of opening up to someone else, but everyone being lame was a large factor as well.

Mike chuckled with her, and looked up to catch El's glaze, she was wearing a similar blush to his own and he felt the sudden urge to move closer to her.

El shifted on the swing seat, feeling compelled to move in closer as well. The pale moonlight beamed across Mikes dark eyes and freckles, making him look incredibly beautiful. She felt her heart catch in her throat as they moved even closer.

They were close enough now that Mike could feel the heat coming off of her body. Her hair was firmly slicked back to way it usually was, but her walk had shaken several of her curls loose and they twisted around her cheeks and ears. That, combined with the oversized grey sweater she was wearing made her look so soft and warm.

They were only inches apart now. They both hitched their breath, suddenly hyper aware of everything that was happening. Every sound, every breath, the whistle of the wind, the blue moon light, every slight movement towards the other. El's eyes fluttered closed, as Mike tilted his head in towards her. She could feel his shaky breathe on her lips, and she realized he was just as nervous as her.

'I can't believe it! I'm about to have my first Kiss! And with Mike Wheeler!'

But then something ripped through the silence.

Just as they were about to close the small space between them, Max and Lucas's laughter filled the night, and they both jumped apart. The chains on their swings groaning from the movement. Lucas and Max came running from the far side of the field, Lucas trailing behind and both teens squealing. It didn't seem like they had seen anything, they were far too preoccupied in whatever nauseating form of couples tag they were playing.

Mike jumped up from the swing and smoothed out his shirt nervously. He was still sporting a deep red blush and a slightly goofy smile. El was sure she didn't look any better. Her stomach felt warm and like it was twisting itself into knots, she couldn't look him in the eyes.

"Lucas I'm going to kick your ass!" Max laughed as Lucas, finally catching up to her, picked her up and threw her over his shoulder. Max slapped at his back but she was laughing too hard to actually be much of a fight.

He set her down once they reached the park again and she punched him hard in the arm. The couple walked over the the swings, both of their faces plastered with huge grins.

"Okay kids, I think it's time to go home." Max said, slapping an arm down on El's shoulder. El sighed, her nerves still racing from her almost-kiss. Max was probably right, it was getting late and they did have school tomorrow morning.

The boys grabbed their bikes and everyone walked out to the road. While they did not live anywhere near each other, Max and Lucas

both started walking off in the direction of Max's house.

"Um Lucas? Aren't you going home?" Mike scoffed at his friend.

"Uh... yeah I am I just want to make sure Max gets home safe." Lucas and Max ginned bashfully at each other. "Because of the weirdos and stuff."

The couple turned around and walked off again, trailing down Old Cherry Road and into the darkness of the night. Even when El couldn't see them, she could hear Max's boisterous laugh.

"They are such dweebs." El chuckled.

"Yeah totally." Mike sneered. They stood in silence for a moment, not wanting to part just yet. "I could... walk you home if you want."

El beamed up at the shaggy dark haired boy and nodded. "That would be cool." She tucked a curl behind her ear, quickly adding with sarcasm; "So that the weirdos don't get me."

They walked slowly down the hill towards the quiet side of town that El lived on. Mike pushed his bike next to him, hands gripped the handle bars. They both stole glances at each other, each time making them quickly look down at their feet. They walked almost the entire way in silence, both too completely lost in thought. El was still dazed that she had been so close to kissing someone, and she hoped he was thinking the same things. Every time she looked over at him her heart thumped loudly in her chest. She wanted to kick herself for being so gushy over him but she just couldn't help it, he was the sweet nerdy boy of her dreams.

In only 20 minutes, an unfortunately short walk, they reached Els home. The lights were off inside, meaning Hopper had gone to bed. Mike didn't know what he had been expecting, but this cozy little farmhouse on the end of the quaint road wasn't it. El was just too surreal to live somewhere so... normal. They stood under the streetlamp for a moment, Mike marveling at the way she looked while bathed in yellow light, and El not wanting to walk away from him just yet. It was a strange feeling, like some kind of gravitational pull keeping her glued to her spot whenever he was near.

Eventually she figured she should say something. "Well this is me."

'I am such an idiot! He knows this is my house he just walked me here!'

"It's nice." Mike said, hoping to drag the conversation out as long as possible.

"I guess i'll see you at school tomorrow?" She asked, looking at the ground.

"Yeah!" He said a little too enthusiastically. "Um... thanks for asking us to sneak out. I had a lot of fun."

"I had fun too. Maybe you should start sneaking out more often, live on the wild side a little bit." She said sarcastically. "Maybe you could even come throw pebbles at *my* window."

Mike's eyes went wide and he suppressed the urge to smile like a dope. "Uh yeah! And maybe we can run around acting like dweebs like Max and Lucas."

El giggled, trying to act apathetic, but desperately wishing he was serious. "Totally! And maybe next time i'll get to walk you home."

"I would like that." Mike smiled.

Suddenly it became apparent that they were standing just inches apart again. El felt her heart beating in her chest, and in an impulse she took another step forward, so close that they were practically embracing.

Mike looked down at her, and his voice caught in his throat. He wanted to tell her how much he liked her. How much fun she was to spend time with, how happy she made him, how he felt like he was alive whenever they hung out. But he just stared at her. Her beauty, her warm hazel eyes, her loose caramel curls, her soft rosy skin. She was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. Even more than that, she was the most amazing girl he had ever met.

On impulse, acting against every instinct he normally would have had, he reached out and put a gentle hand on her cheek, cupping her face. Their sudden proximity made him feel almost dizzy, but

everything about her made him feel dizzy. He let his bike drop to the road, and he placed his other palm lightly on her side.

El was stunned. She wanted him so badly to kiss her, but he didn't move. She wrapped her arms around his shoulder and inched even closer. It felt like an eternity as they held each other, and she realized that if anyone was going to make the move it was going to be her.

So she moved ever closer, and just as she was about to go in for the kill, he spoke.

"El?" His voice was a whisper, his breathe warm on her skin.

"Yes?" She leaned in closer.

"I... never gave you back your mixed tape." He said it like some kind of admission of guilt.

El let out a sudden, short laugh in surprise and stepped back a bit. Her face quirked up in a half grimace, half astonished glower. "Oh... Um, It's fine. Thank you for remembering... I guess."

"Uh yeah... sorry I kept it so long." He fished it out of his pocket. "It was pretty good by the way. I mean I only got to listen to it once before my little sister stole my tape player." He rubbed the back of his neck and cough awkwardly.

"I'm glad you liked it. I'll have to make you another one sometime." El let herself frown fully. Had she misread the entire interaction? Was he really only concerned with her mixed tape? She wanted to punch herself for getting so flustered, and worked up and... *hopeful*.

"Well... um... Have a good night." Mike mumbled, scuffing his shoes along the ground.

El creased her eyebrows at him. Maybe she had gotten a bit carried away, and maybe she had gotten ahead of the situation, but she was damn sure that they almost kissed. Twice! She wasn't going to let him get away so easily.

She turned to face him straight up and down, and looked at him intently. "Mike. I like you." He looked up at her with wide eyes, as if

he had seen a ghost. "I mean it. I think you are nice, and sweet, and you care about people, which is super foreign to me. You make me laugh and you make me happy and I don't feel judged when i'm with you. I like you. A lot."

"El..." He started, still bewildered.

'Go ahead, tell me you don't feel the same way. Why would you?'

"El I like you too. A lot. You are so smart and amazing, and awesome. You don't let people push you around, or push me and the guys around. You are so strong even though you have dealt with a lot, and you are so so crazy intelligent. You know so much about things I had never even heard of. I like you so much."

"Wow..." She breathed, not meaning to say it out loud, but realizing she had when he blushed.

El walked forward, and wrapped her arms around him in a sweet, yet encompassing hug. After a while they stepped apart, but remained close enough to feel each others warm breath as it clouded in the evening air.

"Wow to you too." He Smirked. She punched him in the arm lightly, making them both laugh. She still wanted to kiss him, more than anything she wanted to kiss him, but there would be time for that another day.

El reached out and grabbed his hand, musing over how nice it was to watch the way their fingers laced together. "Goodnight Mike. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Goodnight El." He squeezed her hand softly for a moment before mounting his bike and driving away in the direction of home. The whole way, smiling like the biggest dopey, dweeb anyone had ever seen. He understood every part of the face Lucas had made when he rejoined them on the park. He was head over heels for El Hopper, the Punk Rock badass from Chicago.

El watched him ride away, waiting until he was out of sight before she walked to her house. She decided to use the front door, assuming

it would be much quieter than trying to clamber back up to her window. Her house was silent, but her ears were still ringing with the beating in her chest. She lay back down in her bed, and for the second time that day she muffled a shriek into her pillow.

Only this time, it was a scream of joy. Pure, innocent, unfaltering, heart-swelling, joy. She was head over heels for Mike Wheeler, the kindhearted nerd from Hawkins.

6. 6) Dating 101

Hello all! This chapter isn't one of my favorites, but I hope you enjoy nonetheless because it only gets more wild from this point on!

Enjoy xx.

December 1st, 1987

El woke up dazedly. Stretching and yawning and rubbing the sleep from her eyes, she slowly became aware of her familiar surroundings. The dark black sheer curtains, the warm hued shag carpet, the myriad of posters and drawings Will had made taped up, covering almost every inch of the drab eggshell walls. Her room was warm despite how cold it looked outside, the sky was grey and bleak. Her stomach felt warm and fluttery, the same way it had last night before she went to bed, the same way it did the entire walk home, the same way it did when she almost kissed Mike.

'Oh my god I almost kissed Mike!'

The memory made her sigh happily to herself. She slipped out of bed and walked over to her closet, trying to figure out what to wear. She decided on a Misfits shirt, a pair of old ripped up jeans, and a slightly oversized denim jacket that she had been slowly covering in hand painted patches. She went through her daily ritual of slicking her hair back, first with water, then with a gooey gel, and smoking out her eyes with her favorite grey eyeshadow. When she decided she looked decent, she got ready to go downstairs, and that's when she remembered her fight with Hopper.

El could hear him banging around, and knew he would probably want to talk to her about everything, but that was honestly the last thing she wanted to deal with. She waited until she heard him walk into the downstairs bathroom and decided to make a run for it, hopefully slipping out before he even knew she was awake.

She cracked her door open, backpack in hand, and tiptoed down the

stairs. On the small kitchen table was a plate of freshly warmed Eggos, Hoppers signature 'i'm sorry' food. For a moment she felt like staying and eating, but remembering how cruel he had been made her lose any inkling of an appetite. So she opened the front door and stepped out into the cool December air, and just as she was about to close it behind her, a voice from the living room called out.

"You're trying to sneak out again?"

El whipped around, the anxiety of being caught making her eyes shoot wide open and her blood turn cold.

'Shit.'

She took in a deep breath and closed the door again. She slumped into her chair at the table, nervously shoving a waffle in her mouth so she would have an excuse not to say anything. Hopper took the chair across from her and wiped his hand down his face in frustration.

"Look, kid, I wanted to talk to you about our fight last night." He drummed his fingers on his coffee mug, waiting for her to say something, but she just kept eating her waffle. "I was... pretty out of line with a lot of what I said. I lost my temper and it was wrong of me."

El looked up at him, though her face was still tilted down. She honestly didn't know what to say, it was probably the closest thing to an apology she had ever heard from the gruff man. She could tell it was genuine, but she was still hurt. She understood that he had a daughter once before, a *real* daughter, and that she passed away. She knew that he was often angry, and blew his fuse at a moments notice, and that most of the time it was no ones fault. It was just him letting out some of his pent up anger. Even though she knew all of this, even though she had been on the receiving end of his blow-ups a couple of times before, it didn't make it any easier.

"Do you have anything you want to say?" He asked seemingly concerned.

El swallowed her last bite of Eggo and cleared her throat. "I... I'm

sorry for getting in trouble at school. I know I promised I wouldn't get detention or sent to the principal's office this year and so I'm sorry that I did."

"Its okay, I know that none of this is easy for you." He offered an awkward, tight lipped smile. "You made a mistake, and that's okay. You are a good kid, and all of that stuff I said yesterday was bullshit. You are not immature, and you don't need to grow up any faster than you already are. You are probably more grown up now than I was even when I was 25." He chuckled dryly.

El stared back at him, blank faced for a moment. His eyes looked immensely concerned, even though he was trying to smile through it. "I don't want you to think that i'm mad at you or anything. I was just angry and frustrated and i'm still kind of figuring out this whole dad thing."

El laughed faintly. "Its okay, I understand. I'm still trying to figure out this whole daughter thing."

Hopper let out a somewhat stunned, hearty laugh. "At least we can learn together. I think you're doing a fine job."

"You're not so bad yourself." El smirked. "God we really are a mess aren't we?"

"Yeah pretty much." Hopper stood up from his chair, and carried their empty plates to the sink.

"So does that mean i'm still grounded?" She asked hopefully.

"Not for getting detention." Hopper said with his back turned. "But you are grounded for sneaking out last night."

El threw her head back in exasperation.

"Did you really think I wouldn't hear you? It sounded like you were tap dancing on the shed." He chuckled. "Where did you go huh? Out to see Max?"

"Yeah just to see Max." She answered a little too quickly, and then knowing better than to lie after just getting caught she decided to

add; "And we met up with some friends from school."

"Friends from school? Those brainiac kids you have been hanging out with?" He was pouring his second cup of coffee for that morning.

"Yeah. They had never snuck out before so you don't have to worry about them being bad influences." She sneered, remembering Wills anxious pacing. "I guess im the bad influence."

"Well they probably need it." He scoffed. "God knows I did a hell of a lot worse when I was your age. I just made sure not to get caught." He winked at her.

"I guess i'll have to do better next time then." She winked back, making him laugh into his mug.

"So, which one was the boy who walked you home last night?"

'Shit! He had seen that too?'

"No one!" She scoffed, trying to sound unphazed and failing.

"No one?" He pressed.

"Fine. His name is Mike Wheeler. He is like..."

'The best thing ever? The sweetest most amazing, beautiful, kissable boy in the world?'

"The king of the brainiac's." She smiled to herself, feeling warm blush creep across her face.

"Well tell him that the next time he wants to walk you home, that he should come inside and say hello." Hopper teased, loving the painfully embarrassed look on her face. "And that if he is going to go through all of the trouble of sneaking out, and walking you all the way out here, that he should at least do the gentlemanly thing and kiss you."

"HOP!" El yelled, jumping up from her chair. It made both of them laugh the kind of deep, bellied laughter that makes everything feel better when things get tense. It made him feel like maybe his bitter,

black hole of a heart, wasn't so broken after all. And it made her feel like just maybe she belonged to this strange little family.

After that, they loaded up into his truck and he dropped her off at school. It felt like it was going to be a good day, despite the dreary weather. It felt good because it felt like they were finally a real family, and not just two broken strangers trying to cohabitate. El was finally surrounded by people who cared about her, and who genuinely just wanted to see her happy. It was an unusual feeling that she hoped never went away.

It was still scary, and it probably always would be. Her insecurities would make sure of that, but at least she was trying.

When he pulled up at the school, the boys and Max were already standing around the bike rack waiting for her. When Mike saw the police chief's truck pull up he gave an overly animated, goofy wave. El giggled to herself and Hopper sneered.

"That's the kid huh?" He flicked his cigarette out the window. El nodded. "I guess opposites attract or something."

"Yeah..." El breathed, making heart eyes out the window.

Hopper laughed at her air-headed adoration, and he remembered feeling that way when he was her age. "How about we make a deal?" El turned to him, brows creased in confusion. "How about we agree that if you can stay out of detention for the rest of the year, then you don't have to be grounded. Deal?"

El's eyes lit up. "Deal! Deal I promise!" She nodded wildly and grinned from ear to ear, and then ran out of her door and towards her friends.

He watched how she smiled so genuinely when she approached them. She looked the most happy he had ever seen her, like she was just a normal kid with normal friends. It seemed for just a moment that her worries were all pushed far behind her, and he wanted her to be able to stay like that forever.

When El walked up to her friends, they all greeted her with the same warmth that they always did. Dustin and Max were arguing about something, and Lucas was occasionally adding his opinions on either side, earning him scorned looks from both parties. Will and Mike were chatting idly to themselves about something for an upcoming D&D quest, and they both gave her a small hug. It was nice having some consistency in her life, and these kids were nothing if not consistent.

"El!" Max practically screamed, interrupting a very dramatic speech from Dustin. "Thank god you're finally here! Come on." Max grabbed El's wrist and started dragging her towards the school.

"Where are we going?" El asked, although she knew she had no chance of escaping whatever this was going to be.

"We need to talk." Max flashed her a devilish smirk, which could only mean one of two things. Either she had a scheme planned, or she was going to talk about Lucas.

"Wait up!" Mike jogged down the hall, El giggled at the way his dark hair flopped as he ran.

"Buzz off Wheeler! This is girls talk. No boys allowed." Max sneered. El gave him an apologetic shrug and he watched them disappear into a nearby ladies room, looking dejected.

The girls bathroom had a few freshmen fixing their makeup, or changing out of whatever conservative, ugly sweaters their mothers made them wear, and into neon crop tops. It stunk horribly of sugary perfume and hairspray. Knowing that high school bathrooms are the birthplace of school rumors, Max gave the girls a quick, but firm, death glare, and they beat it, leaving El and Max alone.

"What's the deal?" El asked, watching Max pace nervously back and forth across the tile floor, her long red hair swishing this way and that.

"I did something really really stupid last night, El, and I'm pissed." Max bit at her nails and slumped against the far wall, sliding down to sit on the floor. El, immediately concerned, leaned against one of the

sinks, and looked down on her friend sympathetically.

"Whatever you did i'm sure it isn't that bad." El tried to reassure her. But the truth was, if Max thought it was bad, then it was probably either *terrible* or illegal or both.

"No it is really bad! It was when Lucas walked me home." She buried her face in her hands and El's mind immediately turned from vandalism, and burglary to... something much worse.

"Wait you guys didn't..."

"We made out!" She groaned, practically crying.

El laughed out of relief, and then harder out of what a big deal she was making out of it. "Yeah so what?"

"I had never done that before!" Max scoffed.

"Well neither has he." El said, recounting the information Mike had given her last night.

"Wait what?" She looked almost angry. "How do you know!?"

"Mike told me. We were joking about it last night but I guess it's really true, Lucas is the first one to kiss someone." El snorted.

"Oh my god." Max gaped, astonished. "Okay that makes it a little bit better I guess. But I still feel like a dweeb because I actually really like him."

"Well good, he likes you too. You should ask him on a date or something."

Max's eyes lit up, as if she had never considered that to even be an option. "A date!?" She sounded appalled, but then her face softened. "Yeah a date. Maybe I should, I have been wanting to see the New Nightmare on Elm street!"

El smiled in support of the idea. It was kind of sweet watching Max be flustered for once.

"And you can come!" Max blurted. El was about to argue that dates didn't usually have a third person but she quickly added; "With Mike. Like a double date, that way it's less... intrusive."

El had to admit, the idea didn't sound too bad. She had been wanting to see that movie too, and Mike liked movies so why not? "Yeah okay, that sounds good. A double date." The thought of sitting next to him in the theater made her face flush.

'Maybe i'll even get to hold his hand when he gets scared.'

"Bitchin'! Okay I'll ask Lucas, you ask Mike, but you guys can't like kiss during the whole movie." Max stood up from her spot on the ground and nudged El with her elbow.

"As if! Mike and I haven't even kissed, and you're the one who made out with Lucas remember?" El nudged her back. Max's face went white, but then she started laughing.

"You haven't!? I would have thought you guys had been suckin' face for weeks now with the way you two act around each other." She chuckled. "Guess you're just in love, how disgusting." Max turned around to leave a slightly offended El standing alone in the bathroom.

"We are not!" She called after her fire-haired friend, but the door had already slammed behind her.

El was slightly more worried than she might want to admit about asking Mike to go to the movies with her. Sure they had just admitted that they liked each other, and sure they had almost kissed, but neither of them had ever gone on a date before and it just seemed so foreign.

How do you ask? What do you say? Who should get the middle arm rest? Who buys the candy and popcorn? Knowing that Max and Lucas were going to be there made it slightly easier, but they already seemed so comfortable together. Mike made El tense. Not in a bad way, quite the opposite actually, but it just felt harder to breathe around him sometimes. Like all of the air was sucked out of the room

whenever he smiled, or laughed, or said her name. It was dizzying to try to piece together why she felt so strongly about him, and it was even more disorienting to imagine that some part of him felt the same way about her.

Max had led the conversation with Lucas during lunch, and she more or less asked Mike for El. She kind of had too, because El felt like she was frozen solid the moment the topic was brought up, and they had to make a decision quickly before Dustin and Will came and sat down. It was very unlike the party to want to do things separately, but a double date had to be the exception.

There was some quick bickering back and forth about the fact that Nightmare on Elm Street was an R rated movie, and that they wouldn't be allowed in.

Max rolled her eyes and sighed. "Yeah, that's why you buy a ticket for something else and sneak into the other theater, duh."

There was some more arguing about what was the best type of candy to buy, and what size popcorn would be enough, but finally they all came to an agreement. El just nodded along with whatever Max said because she seemed to have a pretty good understanding of their whole thing and El was pretty much clueless.

After school got out, the two couples made their way to the bike rack and waved off Dustin and Will, using some lame excuse about a group research paper. Dustin didn't seem to buy it, but he didn't argue either.

Lucas and Mike mounted their bikes, and Max stepped up onto her board. The only person without a set of wheels, as usual, was El. While she was fine with walking a few paces (or blocks) behind, Mike insisted she ride with him.

"Is that like... safe?" She asked, eyeing the small banana seat with caution.

"Don't tell me big bad El Hopper is afraid of riding a bicycle." Mike teased.

"Not afraid, just uneasy. I've never ridden a bike before."

"Never!?" Lucas and Mike gaped in unison.

"No I didn't exactly have anyone to teach me." She kicked at the ground.

"Oh right..." Mike looked down in embarrassment. "Well I promise isn't not scary. Just come sit behind me and hold onto my waist." He patted the small seat with a smile.

She threw her leg over the seat, and held him tightly. In any other circumstance it may have been nice to hold onto him, but as he started pedaling she felt like she was surely going to die. Mike chuckled at her death grip, and made sure to go slowly. After a few blocks, a some slight readjustment, she eased up a bit and relaxed. It was actually kind of nice, riding through town. It certainly took less time than walking. Once she actually felt able to look around without falling, El looked around at the cozy little shops, and contentful townsfolk walking around downtown. Max stayed a few feet behind the boys because her board just couldn't keep up, so Lucas decided to ride circles around her. It was all around a nice experience, and in less than 15 minutes they were riding up to the theater.

The boys tucked their bikes around in the back alley just behind a dumpster, and Max insisted upon carrying her board inside like always.

"Okay so just ask for four tickets for Once Bitten." Max whispered to Lucas and Mike. El and Max handed over the few dollars they had but both boys refused to take them.

"No its cool, I got this." Lucas offered Max a small wink and walked up to the counter. The boys ordered their tickets for the lame romantic chick-flick, earning them a knowing glance from the bored looking upperclassmen behind the glass.

Once inside, Max and Lucas argued over who should get the candy. "You paid for the ticket, so i'll buy the candy that's only fair!" Max gripped.

"But guys are supposed to pay for stuff like this!" Lucas huffed back.

"That's bullshit. I don't want you paying for everything like i'm helpless, I have my own money and I want some damn milk duds." She pushed past him and slammed her crumpled ones onto the counter before he could say anything else.

"I'll get the popcorn." El offered quietly at Mike. Mike shrugged and stepped out of her way.

A few minutes later Max and El walked back, arms full of snacks. Max popped a milk dud in her mouth and stuck her tongue out at Lucas.

"This one is for equality!" She raised her candy box against El's excessively large soda like a toast. El laughed hard and added a 'Here Here!' She was really proud of her friend so easily accepting her political outlook.

The couples made their way into the long hallway of viewing rooms. The movie they were supposed to be seeing was playing in the very first theater, while Nightmare on Elm Street was playing all the way at the back. They made sure the coast was clear and hurried down the corridor, briefly ducking behind large cardboard cut out. It reminded El of the first day that they had all really met, sneaking around and breaking rules like this.

They crept into the blackened theater where the opening shots of the movie were already playing. Sweeping orchestral, suspense building music reverberated off the walls. The theater was nearly empty, so they got to have optimal seating, third from top row, middle seats, and they quickly got settled. Lucas and Max snickered to each other over little things they noticed in the film, trying to be their own Mystery Science Theater 3000.

For Mike and El, however, it was a bit less easy. El felt that same tension that she had worried about earlier that day. They bumped elbows a few times in a subconscious fight over the middle arm rest. Their hands touched a few times in the popcorn, making them both flinch away and blush. It seemed so silly, to be so nervous around each other but it just couldn't really be helped.

Mike watched Lucas pull the old 'yawn and stretch' so he could wrap his arm around Max. El watched the way Max cuddled in closer to him, resting her head on his shoulder.

'Why is it so natural for them and so strange for us? What happened to the girl who wasn't afraid of anything?' She thought to herself, wishing she had the guts to lean onto Mike.

Around the 45 minute mark, it seemed like Max and Lucas were not even watching the movie at all. They were just giggling and laughing and whispering to each other. Mike wanted to reach over and give Lucas a smack, but he didn't want to be a killjoy, so he stayed still.

Finally, after what must have been the hundredth accidental, hand touch, or arm rub, or leg graze, El decided enough was enough. She wanted to hold his hand, so hold his hand she would damn it! She had won the silent arm rest battle, and his hand was laying flat on his nervously bouncing knee. She slid her arm from its perch and into his lap, gently lacing her fingers in his. Mike felt like he was going to gasp, but he covered it with a quiet cough and El giggled.

Feeling somewhat empowered by her bold move, she decided to take it a step further. She scooted down in her seat so her head was level with his shoulder and leaned onto him. This time Mike really did gasp, it was a small one but El still heard it.

"Is this okay?" She whispered up at him.

"Yeah! Yeah totally okay. Great actually!" He said a bit louder and more enthusiastically than he meant too. El giggled and squeezed his hand and suddenly the date didn't feel so stiff, or awkward, it felt nice. Her hand felt like it belonged in his.

The rest of the movie went by nicely. Mike wasn't the biggest fan of horror cinema, but he got to squeeze El's hand whenever he got startled. They were so content that they didn't even notice when their friends whispering and giggling turned into obnoxious kissing. When the credits began rolling and the lights came up, Lucas and Max jumped apart. El gave Max an accusing glare but she just shrugged and gave a 'What can I say?' face.

It was already dark by the time they got outside, and substantially colder than when they had arrived. El zipped up her jacket and braced herself for the long walk home.

"I can bike you to your house if you want." Mike offered hopefully. She would have taken him up on it, if it weren't for her remembering what her dad has said about him 'coming inside and saying hello'.

"Don't worry about it, Wheeler. Me and El need to have some girl talk I think." Max slapped a hand on Mike's back and El nodded.

"Oh okay well... I'll see you tomorrow I guess. I had a lot of fun." Mike blushed at El.

"I had fun too." El beamed. "We should go on another date sometime."

"Yeah!" Mike practically shouted. "Wait... this was a date!?"

El stared at him in dejected confusion for a moment before busting out with laughter.

"Holy shit, Mike are you seriously that dense?" Max asked, matching El's laughter.

"What!? I didn't know! I thought we were just hanging out!" His face turned deep scarlet.

"Dude are you kidding me?" Lucas added with a sigh.

"I don't know! I just misunderstood!" Mike tried to defend himself but his friends were all howling with laughter around him. He grumpily got on his bike and rolled his eyes at them.

"Hey wait!" El called, catching her breath and running over to him in the alley. "I'm sorry I laughed, I just can't believe you didn't know."

"I've never been on a date before, and I always thought that like... the boys asked the girls so I guess I just missed it." He fiddled with the hem of his sweater.

"You should know me well enough by now to know that I'm not into the whole 'traditional' thing." She air quoted the word and grabbed

his hand, making him look up at her.

"Yeah I guess you're right. It's just hard to believe that I girl would want to go out with me." He smirked. "You must have really bad taste."

El giggled and pulled him in for a hug. "I think my taste is pretty great actually." She whispered into his shoulder. He hugged her back tightly and felt whatever embarrassment he had leave.

"Okay well how about this." She asked pulling away from him. "Mike wheeler? Will you go on a date with me this Saturday?" She asked trying to sound official.

He pretended to be thinking hard about his answer, tapping on his chin and looking around. "I'll have to check my calendar but that will probably work."

"Good. Wear something pretty." El chuckled. She shifted up onto her tip toes and kissed his cheek. He blushed all over again as she turned to walk away, but she felt empowered. Turns out all she had to do was take the lead.

'Guess i'll have to make note of that for next time.' She thought, walking back to join Max, as the two boys rode off together. The thought made her smile and feel all warm and gooey inside, but it was immediately followed with a much for exciting, much more nerve wracking thought.

'Oh my god there is going to be a next time!'

"So..." Max sighed, hooking an arm around El as they walked down the quiet street. "This was pretty fun. Good idea, Hopper."

"It was fun. It was a good movie, too bad you didn't watch it." El teased.

"Hey I watched it!" Max gripped. "Or I guess... maybe just listened to it. It sounded scary."

El laugh and leaned in closer to her friend. Everything with Max was always so comfortable. She hadn't thought she would ever find

someone as special to her as Kali, but Max was quickly climbing the ranks in El's heart. The boys all did too. There was something so special about them.

Dustin with his seemingly infinite knowledge, the boy was practically a walking encyclopedia, was always so easy to discuss things with. Lucas was hilarious and, once won over, probably the most loyal and loving person El had met. Will and his creativity and appreciation for all things artistic was probably the one she had the most in common with. Max and her quick wit, while sometimes a bit overwhelming, was like a ray of sunshine around those she cared about.

And Mike. Painfully dorky, but vastly emotionally mature. Over the weeks, their conversations had gotten more and more deep. No longer needing small talk to keep each other entertained. Sometimes they didn't even have to talk at all. They just understood each other. El felt like all of her friends understood her, in some capacity, in ways she had never expected or dreamed of.

Parts of her still felt like it was undeserved. What should she possibly have to offer to a group of people so smart, and caring, and wonderful? But they seemed to enjoy her company and, more importantly, they accepted her.

"You know." El smirked, feeling the mushy thoughts start to boil over. "You are pretty much the best person ever."

"Yeah I know." max teased. "But it's still nice to hear. You are pretty much the best person ever too, Hopper."

"Maybe you and I should ditch everyone else and run away together." El joked.

"That would be kind of awesome, but then you'd miss your date."

The pair laughed as they reached the cross roads that meant they would have to split up.

"Well how about this, if the date is shitty, then you and I can go to California and start new lives as like... master thieves or something."

"Sounds like a deal. I'll start packing because there's no way Wheeler

wont make a fool of himself."

Max stuck out her hand for El to shake and she did so gladly, laughing and smiling and enjoying the moment with a friend who really was game for anything. There was no doubt in El's mind that if they really did have to run away, Max would in a heartbeat.

"Bitchin', I'll see you tomorrow comrad."

With a salute and a turn, Max headed down the road towards home and El did the same. Max was great, wonderful actually, but El knew she couldn't run away this time. She hoped nothing would make her want to run away ever again.

7. 7) Troubled, Broken, and Perfect

Hello everyone! This chapter is a little darker than the previous have been. I feel like I have spent a lot of chapters talking about *why* El has emotional trauma and why its difficult for her to open up, but not so much about *how* it actually affects her. This chapter deals with depression, hopefully in a realistic and relatable way. I feel like it was therapeutic for me to write, and I tried to base all of it off of my own personal struggles with these feelings.

I hope you enjoy, and I hope that it can validate the way that some of you might feel.

December 4th, 1987

Will Byers was a troubled kid.

That was the vibe El got the moment she met him. He was quiet, usually deep in thought, and he just wasn't as free spirited as the rest of his friends. His art, while amazing, was usually dark, and dreary, and oozed loneliness. She didn't know him well enough to understand what exactly ate him up so badly, but she could relate.

Some days are just *hard*. Today was one of those days for the shrimpy, pale faced, kid. He was sitting at his normal desk in Art, and scribbling messily over a sheet of paper. Dark lines of charcoal and smudged pastels depicting what looked like a dense forest.

El wasn't sure if it was her place to ask, but she cared about Will. So she did.

"Is everything okay?" El whispered.

Will seemed far away. It took him a couple of seconds before he even realized he was being spoken too. He lifted his eyes from the paper and met El's gaze. He looked tired. No, more like *exhausted*. His eyes were rimmed in dark purple and his face looked puffy and paler than usual, almost blue. He looked like hell.

"Yeah. everything is fine." His voice was small, even for him.

"Are you sure? You know you can talk to me if you need to." El meant it.

"Yeah I know." His eyes shifted back to his drawing. All dark blues and greys. Dark skeletal trees and thick rolling mist. "It's just... do you ever feel like, I don't know, that you are living in fog?"

El knew exactly what he meant. Like everything you did, everything you tried, was like moving through quicksand. Making any attempt at change impossible and pulling you deeper.

"Sometimes." She stated honestly. "Is that how you feel?"

"For the last little while, yeah. I don't know why it's been so difficult. I keep spacing out and losing sleep. I keep having bad dreams and they always feel so real."

"They aren't thought." El placed a comforting hand on his arm and smiled faintly. "I know it sucks, like your own subconscious is messing with you, but you have to leave it behind."

"I try, it's just not easy. Like last night, I had a dream that a crazy monster attacked me and trapped me in this... really horrible place that looked like home, but it was different. Everything was off... It felt so real that when I woke up I thought I was still there."

"That does sounds really scary, i'm sorry that happened." El said with a comforting sincerity. "I think you have been reading to many comic books." She added, teasing him and gesturing to the stack of comics he had been flipping through as drawing references.

"Maybe you're right." Will smiled every so slightly, but El could tell it was genuine.

"What's important is that you are here now, and not anywhere scary. Unless you count school as a scary place and Mrs. Lawrence as a monster."

"Now i'm not sure which is worse." Will looked up and eyed their art teacher cautiously and El giggled.

She really felt for Will. Some days were just worse than others, with no real explanation of why. One moment it's fine, and the next it seems like everything is collapsing. One second you can be laughing, and the next you feel like you have a rain cloud above you that no one else can see.

She gave his arm a gentle squeeze and changed the subject to some concert she had heard about. Sometimes when you feel that low, you just need someone to take your mind off of it, and she was glad to be that person for Will. There had been so many times before where she hoped more than anything someone would be that person for her, and maybe Will was it.

December 5th, 1987

Saturday rolled around faster than seemed possible.

El had been excited about her upcoming, *official*, date with Mike all week, but now that it was actually happening, the timing couldn't have been worse.

Her day had started the way any perfectly-terrible day could, with a heart pounding, cold sweat inducing, adrenaline pumping nightmare. The disjointed and fragmented kind that leaves you reeling for hours afterwards. The kind that sits ominously on the tip of your tongue, but never actually surfaces enough to let you move on.

In her dream she had been sitting with Kali in the back seat of the van, driving out to nowhere in particular. They were laughing and singing along to a song on the radio and then *snap*. Like a flash of lighting everyone was gone. Leaving El alone in the van as it barreled down the road, eventually rolling off the side of a cliff.

'Must be something in the air.' She thought to herself, thinking back on her conversation with Will the day before.

All she knew is that she felt like garbage. Like a black cloud of self hatred, and anxiety blanketed her, as if it were strapping her to her bed and not allowing her to move. So she didn't. Not for a long time at least. Not until Hopper got called into work, and sitting in isolated

silence made her feel practically agoraphobic.

She drug herself to the bathroom, turning the shower nozzles on as hot as they would go and letting the steam curly around her, hoping it would melt away some of the brain fog.

Then it was back to her room, and while her bed looked so inviting and cozy, she forced herself to get dressed.

It was a *date* after all, and she was pretty sure you couldn't go on a date in faded floral print pajamas. She decided to wear something easy. Jeans and a slightly baggy t-shirt.

The hardest part was the makeup. It felt actually disgusting to sit and stare at herself for any length of time. So instead she suffered through the 30 seconds it took to apply mascara, and she didn't even bother to tame her unruly damp curls.

'Mike is going to think I am such a slob. I guess if he can't handle me at my worst, then he doesn't deserve my best.'

El shuffled into the kitchen, brewing a cup of coffee and lighting a cigarette. The Hopper family 'breakfast of champions'. It was already almost noon, and Mike was supposed to be there any minute. She was honestly dreading the idea of having to talk to anyone, even if that person was Mike.

El spotted Hoppers thick denim jacket hanging by the door, and threw it on. It was so big on her that it very well could have been a tent, but it was comforting. Something to hide inside of. And it smelled like him, like cigarettes and bitter coffee with just a hint of something earthy, like trees and dirt and rain.

As if on cue, a car pulled up out front. None of the boys had their own cars, but Mike had been ecstatic to announce that his Mom was letting him borrow hers for the day. Apparently Karen was over the moon that Mike had a date. A *real* one.

El watched out the window from her place leaned against the counter as Mike stepped out of the vehicle, adjusted his slightly baggy knitted sweater, and grabbed something from the passenger seat. She nearly

choked on her sip of coffee when she saw it was a bundle of flowers.

'Jesus Wheeler, what a sap.'

The thought made her blush.

Mike made his way up the walkway, with that quintessential Mike nervous grin, and before he even knocked on the door, El opened it. His hand was raised to rap on the door, and his eyes went wide when she startled him.

"Holy shit are you physic?"

"Just a little." She teased despite herself.

"I um... got you flowers." Mike smiled shyly. El was close enough now to take in the sight of a 'date ready' Mike Wheeler.

His hair looked freshly washed and a tad bit puffier than normal. His freckles were rimmed with a warm blush that spread across his nose and up onto his forehead. He wore a dark green cable knit sweater that reminded her of something a ship captain would wear and, folded neatly across the neckline, was the collar of a black button up shirt. He looked handsome, beautiful even, but all El could think was much she didn't deserve the fuss.

"Thank you Mike, they are really lovely. You didn't have to do anything like this." The bouquet was a simple arrangement of coral colored roses, ferns, and baby's breath.

They were beautiful. Almost as beautiful as the boy who gave them to her, but it just felt... *wrong*. That familiar and hauntingly dark piece of herself spoke up in the back of her mind.

'You don't deserve this. You are going to ruin this. You ruin everything.'

"I know but I wanted too." Mike smiled warmly. "I know you aren't big on traditional stuff like this but... who doesn't like flowers?"

"I love them." She honestly did. "Some traditions are worth keeping."

Mike looked up at her clearly for the first time, pushing past his own

nerves to do so. He had a bad habit of avoiding eye contact when nervous.

She looked lovely, and the word that kept coming to mind was '*soft*'. He had never seen her hair in all its curly glory, with its golden hued twists, swirling and cupping her cheeks and ears. Her eyes weren't smoked with black or grey like usual, making them appear even larger than normal. There was something enchanting about her, and she looked so small in the oversized jacket that he assumed belonged to the Chief. Gorgeous.

Then her eyes met his, and he saw something dark behind them. Something sullen and distant. She looked *vacant*.

El took the flowers and walked into the kitchen. "I'm gonna put these in water. You can come in."

He did, taking hesitant steps into unknown territory. The Hoppers house looked completely normal. Small, homey, obvious signs of the chief gauging the ashtray next to the comfy arm chair, and empty beer cans in the recycling bin. There were touches of El too. A crate of vinyls next to an old record player, a pair of combat boots tossed by the staircase, and the doe eyed girl herself placing her new flowers into a vase.

"Um... Do you want to get going? I thought we could go to a movie and then get dinner at that fancy restaurant that opened in Kurly." He shifted his weight, trying to gauge why she seemed so upset. As he mentioned eating, her stomach growled loudly and he chuckled. "Or we could go over there now."

"That sounds awesome actually but um..." She bit her lip, dreading the idea of some romantic restaurant with dim lighting and candles. "Can we maybe just go eat somewhere here in town?"

"Yeah sure, no problem, do you have somewhere in mind?"

Benny's Burgers was a Hawkins staple eatery. It was cozy, the food was greasy and delicious, and the namesake himself welcomed any visitors like family. El and Max had spent several afternoons here,

sharing fries and complaining, or sharing sundaes and studying (and complaining).

This was the perfect location for the kind of low-key, no pressure date El needed. Even if every time she looked at Mike she got goosebumps. Also, drowning your sorrows in syrup is a great way to perk up a bit.

"Is that little Mikey Wheeler?" A booming cheerful voice hollered out from behind the counter.

"Hey Benny, how's it going?" Mike rubbed the back of his neck and smiled wryly.

"I'm good, kid, real good. You turned out real tall didn't ya? I remember when you couldn't even see over my counter." Benny boasted, tossing a rag over his shoulder. "And miss Hopper, nice to see you again. How's the old man?"

"Aw you know, old and grumpy." El joked. Jim and Benny were good friends, had been since high school. Benny swooned the moment Hop moved back into town, and always treated El like a long lost friend.

Benny laughed heartily as he often did. "You got that right. You want your regular?"

"Yes please." El smiled back.

Mike, who had been silently blushing at the entrance, stepped forward and ordered the famous double cheeseburger and Benny Hop work. The pair choose a booth near the back of the restaurant.

"I feel overdressed." Mike admitted, fidgeting with the collar of his shirt.

"You look nice." El grinned. He really did, and Mike in a 'grandpa sweater' wasn't exactly uncommon. "Sorry I put a damper on your plans, I guess I just wanted to do something a little less... formal."

"That's okay, you did tell me to 'where something pretty'. I'm just happy to be hanging out with you."

And there it was. Like a punch to the gut. He was so *nice*. So sweet, and honest. He always meant everything he said to a painful degree, and it just seemed to undeserved. He got her flowers, made plans, borrowed a car, dressed up. And here El was, dressed for a day on the couch rather than a night on the town, and he was still being so *nice*.

'*So why does it hurt so much?*' El questioned herself looking at his bright grin.

'*Because you don't deserve it.*' Some darker part of her answered.

She fought back a cringe.

Just as she was going to say something she would probably regret, Benny brought out their orders.

"Double cheeseburger for bean pole, and a double-decker waffle with whipped cream for miss sunshine." Benny smiled. 'Miss sunshine' had been his nickname for El from the first day they met. Benny thought he was hilarious, because she was obviously anything but 'sunny'. Hopper and now Mike seemed to agree.

"Sunshine?" Mike smirked as soon as Benny headed back into the kitchen.

"Yeah. Its because i'm such a pleasure and wear bright colors all the time."

"Hmm. Fitting." He chuckled. "Much better than 'bean pole'."

"At least that *is* fitting." El teased, although it was true. Mike had to be nearly six feet tall, and still growing, and the poor kid was scrawny too, lanky even.

"Hey, Sunshine is fitting. You are a pleasure."

Strike two. Alarms went off in El's head synchronizing with the butterflies in her stomach. It was dizzying, how she could love the attention from this new *flirtier* real-date Mike, and hate that she was receiving it all at the same time.

She stifled her bubbling anxiety with a forced smile, and dug into her

food as Mike mirrored from across the table. It was fine for a while. Just comfortable. The silence between them as they ate, the chatter from people sitting at the counter, the small talk about school and the other Party members.

Mike's hand found her across the small table. It was electrifying, and El grinned. Then, as the quiet set in and their plates were nearing empty, something else crept forward.

Its difficult to explain, or attempt to describe. Like self sabotage. When you *feel* terrible, so you want to do something to make yourself feel *worse*. It's like punishment for a crime you didn't commit. It's like a game of trying to find out just how low you can make yourself feel. It's pointless, and often times, far more detrimental than the fragile state of being that makes you act out in the first place.

She snapped.

"Why are you so nice to me?" Her face was flat. Unreadable. Mike looked up from his plate expecting it be a joke, only to find it was anything but.

"What?"

"Why are you so nice to me?" El reideratted. "You are always saying such sweet things all the time. What is your motive?"

"El what are you talking about? I just like you." Something resembling offense rose in his gut as she stared him down, clearly unsatisfied with the explanation.

"Why?"

"Are you seriously asking me why I like you?" His voice rose with a bit more indignation that intended.

"Yes. Honestly. Because I know who I am, Mike. I'm not flirty, or sweet, or charming. I'm crass, and brazen and I am always on the offence. I'm no ones fucking 'sunshine'. So be honest; Why are you so nice to me."

She had sat back in the booth and crossed her arms.

"I... I don't know how to answer that." He admitted. Not because he didn't, because in all honesty he could probably fill an entire book with the things he liked about her, but because he was confused at her sudden mood shift. They had been having fun, hadn't they? They had admitted they liked each other before, and this was their second date technically. So where was this coming from?

"You aren't even going to try to lie to me about it?"

"What!? No! What would I even have to lie about?"

"Forget it, Mike." She sighed. "This was a mistake. I'm gonna walk home." She stood up, arms still crossed and ran out into the parking lot.

The moment the cool air touched her skin it felt like her chest was caving in.

'Stupid stupid stupid. All you ever do is run away. worthless . pathetic.'

Instant regret filled her head and clouded her eyes. She had tunnel vision, focusing only on the ground in front of her as she sped away from the diner. She didn't *want* to hurt Mike, she didn't even *want* to hurt herself, it just happened. Like a tail spin. Like quicksand. Like fog.

She was so focused on walking further and further from the scene of whatever strange crime she had just committed that she didn't even realise she had forgotten her jacket. Or that it was starting to snow. Or that Mike was quickly crossing the parking lot between them.

He had watched her flee the booth. He sat there with his mouth open for a moment honestly expecting this to be some sort of deranged joke. But then she was pushing through the door and marching across the gravel and he realized she was serious.

He darted up to follow her, grabbing her jacket and throwing cash on the table to pay before he ran out into the lightly falling snow. The first winter freeze.

He caught up to her just as she entered the treeline of the woods surrounding the diner.

"El! Please slow down!" Mike hollered.

She whipped around with venom. Tears had built up in the corners of her eyes and her face was red from frustration and the nipping cold.

"Leave me alone, Mike." Her voice was quiet and pleading despite how enraged she looked.

"El, i'm sorry, but i'm not going to do that." He answered sternly. Mike's temper had gotten him in trouble on more than one occasion. He was always saying the wrong things in the wrong tone, and arguing things that he had no place weighing in on. He was determined, if nothing else, and stubborn. "I'm not going to leave you alone until you give me an explanation."

"I don't owe you shit." She bit back, surprised by his steadfast attitude.

"I never said you owed me anything, but it would be nice to know why you literally just ran out in the middle of us eating together." He was raising his voice now. It made the space between them as they stood just inside the forest feel tense.

She softened. Not because she was swayed by his words, but because it was apparent that he was upset *for* her. Not at her.

Suddenly the rage simmered into hopelessness and sorrow and she wavered. "Mike, I... I'm fucking hopeless. Okay? This was all a mistake because I am a broken person and I just... I do shit like this. I ruin things."

He stared back at her, astonished by her honesty and the bitter look of self hatred she had written across her face. He took a hesitant step in her direction.

"El, its okay. You didn't ruin anything, you just scared me. I thought I did something to make you upset, and if I did im sorry."

"You didn't do anything. It's all me." She clung to herself, her arms wrapping around her torso line vines slowly suffocating a tree.

"El, you are not broken. A little mixed up maybe, a little hurt, but not

broken. You are so strong and brave and unwavering. You are so so tough." He took another step towards her, holding out her jacket like an offering of peace.

"Mike I *am* broken. You are so nice and caring and so fucking considerate. You brought me flowers? You had this whole nice date planned and I made us go to Benny's? You dressed up and I couldn't even get ready today because I didn't want to look in the mirror. I'm not strong. I'm not tough or brave. I just ruin things." She really was crying now, her tears stinging her face in the cold breeze.

"I did those things because I like you El! Not because I thought you would do them back, not because I wanted to impress you or force you to live up to them. I just like you. You asked why i'm so nice, and it's because you *are* brave and strong. You are constantly surprising me and challenging my ideas about things. I thought this date *had* to be all stuffy and sophisticated, but you showed me that we could have more fun just hanging out in town. I mean Jesus, even doing homework is fun with you. I just like you." Mikes voice was as intense and determined as it was sweet and concerned.

El reached out for the jacket and he wrapped it around her shoulders. She turned to him, wordlessly, and fell into his arms. She just cried. Letting out the pent up hatred, self pity, anger, and resentment. Letting the snow fall around them and the wind carry away the fog that shrouded her. Mike held her, saying nothing and allowing his words to sink in and fill whatever holes she had in her heart.

Eventually, as the sun began to sink behind the frostbitten clouds, Mike lead El out of the woods and back towards his car. He got in the driver's seat, started the engine and drove. Not towards El's house like she anticipated, but down a country road she had never been on.

It twisted and wove and took them further out to the edge of town. He took an old dirt access road, and then another, and another. The roads progressively got more and more narrow, the trees on either side got more and more dense until the road eventually ended all together.

Mike parked the car, shut off the engine and looked over at El with the smallest hint of a smile. "Do you trust me?"

She nodded.

She took his hand and followed him into the woods. She was exactly sure when she had stopped crying. Maybe when the surroundings became unfamiliar, maybe when the trees became increasingly more covering with moss. Or most likely, when she became lost in the magnetic nature of the winter sunset. Brilliant pink and golden yellows, sending god rays through the clouds and illuminating the composure on Mike's face, making him look almost ethereal.

He led her through the forest, sure of each step and aware of each turn. Eventually the trees gave way all together to a rocky path dusted with the powdery snow, a rocky hand cut land shelf, and a plunging cliff overlooking impossibly blue water.

El was about to ask why they were here, why on earth he had brought her to an old quarry in the middle of nowhere, when he spoke;

"I used to come here all the time when I was younger. I would ride my bike out here and not tell anyone where I was going. I used to sit on the edge with my feet dangling off and imagine that I was brave enough to jump off. I knew that if I did, I would probably die, but even in my daydreams I still wouldn't be able to do it. I was a coward. I was terrified of ever doing anything less than perfect. I was afraid of what my Father might say if I died. I was afraid of ruining my mother's reputation. I was afraid of making Nancy's friends think she came from a family of freaks. I was afraid of what would happen to my friends if I wasn't around."

Mike said all of this as he walked, his hands still interlocked with hers, ever closer to the edge. She watched him talk, listening to the way his words were always so poetic and captivating. Everything he ever said was so assured and important.

"Then one day, Dustin and I were out here messing around when a couple of total mouthbreathers started chasing us. We ran out here to the quarry and this sadist Troy pulled a knife on Dustin. He said he was going to cut out his baby teeth if I didn't jump over the edge. I didn't even have to think about it. I dropped my backpack and walked right up to the edge of the cliff and was literally a second

from jumping when the other goon pulled me back and said they were kidding. They didn't bother us for a long time after that because they thought I was a psycho for being willing to literally kill myself for my friends. I don't know, maybe I am a little crazy, but the guys, and now you and Max, you mean more to me than anything. I would happily risk my life to make sure any single one of you was safe."

He turned to her. He grabbed her other hand and looked deep into her eyes. She saw something in them she had never noticed before, something in all of her weeks of searching had missed. Mike Wheeler was damaged too. He had just as many broken pieces as she did, even if they were for completely different reasons.

"What i'm trying to say is, I like you El. And I don't take that lightly. I want to be your friend, I want to be more than just your friend. I want to be here for you even when you don't feel like getting out of bed, or when you hate yourself, or when you want to jump off a cliff because that is the kind of person I am. So please, don't ever worry that I don't care about you."

El's eyes flooded all over again and she pulled him into what was quite possibly the most desperate hug she could muster.

"Mike, i'm sorry. I'm so so sorry. I get so stuck in my own head that I forget to look at whats happening around me and this time that included you. I like you so much. You are the best friend I could ever ask for." She said all of it into his shoulder. He didn't even need to see her to know she meant it. He could tell from her fists balled up in his shirt and the way she clung to him for dear life.

He pulled back, just enough to look into her eyes. She saw that there were tears in his too.

'God, he is beautiful even when he cries.'

Mike moved his hand from its place around her shoulders, to cupping her cheek gently. He rubbed a tear away with his thumb and it made her breath catch. Usually she was the bold one, but today was not her day in almost every sense of the word.

He leaned into her, and she reciprocated, moving towards him like a

satellite crashing back into earth. She felt fire burning in her stomach and in her fingertips, she felt like gravity was abandoning her, and her feet would at any moment lift from the ground, being tethered by his grasp alone.

She could feel is warm breath on her lips, she could see the stars in his eyes, and just as they were a mere second away from closing the gap, a sudden and booming car horn ripped through the silence, echoing off the walls of the quarry.

Mike and El jumped apart, both stepping back from the edge and looking for the source.

The horn belonged to a pair of headlines at the quarries shore across the reservoir. A pair of headlights El recognized to belong to none other than her fathers police cruiser.

"Jesus." Mike gasped, trying to regain his panting breath from the shock of being jarred from such a tender moment.

"Do you um... want to walk me to the car?" El asked, cursing her adoptive dad for ruining what would have finally been her first kiss.

"And meet your... Police officer dad?" Mike question hesitantly.

"Sheriff." El corrected with a smile. "And he is nice I promise, he likes to play tough but he is actually a sappy teddy bear."

"Okay sure." Mike gulped and followed her down the steep gravel path than wound down the hill.

Hopper was resting out the window, signature cigarette hanging from his lips and iconic hat silhouetted by his high beams.

"I got a disturbance call that two kids were fooling around out by the quarry. Guess they were right." Hopper smirked, looking proud of himself.

"Very funny." El grimaced. "Sure you weren't napping on the job again?"

"Maybe I was, maybe I wasn't." Hopper chuckled. "So this much be

the famous Wheeler. Nice to meet you young man." Hopper stuck his arm out for Mike to shake.

"You too s-sir." Mike mumbled, meeting Hoppers hand halfway and wincing at the older mans firm grip.

"Please, call me Hop. Everyone else does." Hopper winked and Mike nodded. "You need a ride back home?"

"No um... I parked my car on the old access road so I will just... walk back to it um... Bye El." Mike smiled nervously, shifting his weight back and forth as he so often did..

"I had fun tonight Mike. Thanks for... Everything." She smiled, knowing that a simple thank you wasn't nearly enough, but knowing she couldn't exactly tackle hug him and kiss him the way she wanted too.

"Anytime, El. Goodnight. Bye Sir- uh... I mean Hop." Mike waved, then turned on his heels and retreated back up the slope.

El watched him leave, Hopper watched too but for his own reasons. El eventually circled to get into the passenger seat, check out her blushing skin and red eyes in the rearview mirror.

"So, he seems nice." Hopper said once they started back on the main road.

"Yeah... He is." El sighed contently, watching the trees and street lights flicker past as they drove home.

Nice didn't cut it, not in the slightest. Mike was perfect. Maybe not a perfect person, but perfect for her. Perfect because he was just as flawed as he was calculated. Just as reserved as he was outspoken. He was the extra weight the levels in her mind needed to remain balanced. He was the reasoning to her spontaneous disposition. The voice to her thoughts. He made her feel *whole*, or at least as close to it as she had felt in a long time.

What she didn't realize, what neither of them realized, is that El needed someone just as convicted as her, for different reasons, and Mike was nothing if not convicted. He would do, and nearly has

done, anything for his friends, and El needed friends who could match her ferocity for doing anything for the cause.

Her cause may have changed, but her passion for it never faltered. Her morals may have skewed, but her philosophy never could. Her old life may be far behind, but the lessons it taught her would never fade.

Those thoughts of worthlessness and being undeserved of affection lingered, swarming through her mind like flies, but she could think about Mike and his kindness and feel them fading. She replayed words that Kali had spoken to her many years ago, that she repeated countless times during their life together, in her mind as they neared home, now holding them in a new regard.

"You can do anything you set your mind to, Jane. But you can't do it alone.

If someone doesn't match your passion, then they don't deserve you."

8. 8) Not so Cool, but Totally Bitchin'

Hey everyone! I just wanted to say thank you for your wonderful comments on the last chapter. A lot of you said that it was close to home, and that it was nice to see someone work through the same issues you face. I am really really touched that you guys feel that way, because that was my intent when writing it. This story has been really amazing for me to be able to express some of my own inner demons, and it means the world that it translates through to others. I love all of you, and I hope all my little sad El's out there can find their Mike Wheeler!

January 7th, 1988

It's been over a month since the infamous Benny's diner date fiasco. Winter break began and ended, Christmas came and went, as did New Years Eve.

Mike had spent most of his break away visiting family somewhere in Illinois, and Max went to California to see her father, leaving El alone for most of those chilly schoolless days.

It was becoming more and more apparent that 'alone' was not a good thing for El to be. Coupling that with the conflict and discomfort often associated with Christmas for adopted children, and the holidays end up being more depressing than magical. It just reminded her of the family she went so many years without, and braving the cold off in some abandoned building somewhere.

Hopper tried, he really did. They went and cut down their own tree, the decorated it in soft white lights and shiny green and red ornaments. They even made a popcorn garland, making sure to pop two bags (one for the tree, and one for eating). It was all sweet and homey, but El couldn't deny the feelings that this time of year always brought. Of isolation and being out of place.

So, setting out into the snow, in a pair of new combat boots and a thick leather jacket, El made her way to one house she was sure to be welcomed into. Wills.

Will and El found a sense of kinship with one another. They would spend all day listening to Music and watching trash TV while their respective parents were at work. Jonathan would sometimes pick her up since he was visiting from school, and play his mixtapes loud. There were a few days that Dustin and Lucas came over, and the four of them would get lost in movie lore, or in captivatingly mind-numbing cartoons.

By the time Max and Mike finally came back into town, it was time for school to start again. So much for a New Years kiss. El was ecstatic to see both of them regardless. On the first day back, El practically knocked both of them over with a hug that began with a running start.

While she was glad to have her two closest friends back, it became apparent how much closer the break had made her to the others as well. El and Dustin would giggle about inside jokes that the others had missed out on, her and Lucas had silly nicknames for each other, and her and Will had become almost like counselors to one another.

It was no longer 'The Party + El and Max'. Now they were a unit, interchangeable with their banter, and content no matter the pairing or situation.

Lucas and Max were essentially an official couple (at least as far as anyone as school was concerned). They held hands, they walked each other to and from their classes, they even kissed goodbye outside of school on more than one occasion.

Max was head over heels for the dorky boy, who often wore his pants a little too high, and his shirts a little too tucked in, to ever be cool. She didn't care of course, she said he was 'cool by association', and truthfully she liked all of the nerdy things about him. All the same, Lucas was absolutely starstruck by the fire-haired, fire-tempered, a little too blunt for her own good skater girl from California. It was sweet to see, and endlessly fun to tease them for, and the rest of the party made sure they never lived down each and every display of affection.

Mike and El, however, were a different story altogether. Still too in awe of each other to make any kind of progress towards a

relationship, and still flustered and nervous around the other constantly. Their bond had grown stronger, that was a given. No longer needing small talk or formalities, and often jumping into deep and thought provoking conversations out of the blue.

El felt almost intimidated by Mike's kindness. Whenever she was with him, she would think back to that date at the diner that she ruined, and the following trip to the quarry. How he knew exactly what to say, exactly how she was feeling. She was terrified of ruining whatever it was they had before it even started, but god did she love being around him.

Mike, on the other hand, got all dumb and tongue-tied around her, especially when they were with their friends. The last thing he wanted was for them to receive the same amount of teasing that Lucas and Max dealt with. He resolved that he was much better with her when they were one on one, only alone times was a precious commodity that he rarely got to take advantage of. Max and El were practically joined at the hip, and shaking off his own friends was difficult too.

So when El asked him to have another geometry study session (alone) after school, he nearly screamed with excitement.

"Yeah, yeah totally! No problem! Sounds good!" He stumbled over his words, trying to look nonchalant and failing horribly. El had surprised him by meeting him at his locker. All of his help from before had raised her grade to a C+ but she knew Hopper wouldn't stand for anything less than at least a B.

"Great, I will meet you after 6th at your bike, we can ride to the library." She grinned at him, musing over the slight pink tinge to his face. She turned around, books in hand, and walked towards her next class. Mike watched her walk all the way down the hallway, somewhat entranced by the way her shoulders and hips moved. He shook himself out of his little dopey trance when the bell rang.

All he could think about for the entire rest of the day was how he would finally be able to talk to her without sounding like a big idiot. He would have time to think over his words, and he wouldn't be scrutinized by his friends. Maybe today would finally be the day that

they dropped whatever reservations they had. Maybe today would be the day he kissed her.

When the final bell rang out, Mike was up and out of his seat before it even stopped chiming. He waited at his bike for a full five minutes before Max and El walked towards him, laughing about something.

"Okay you crazy kids, have fun on your little nerd date." Max smirked at them, doing her best impression of a concerned mother. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do!"

"I literally don't think there is anything you *wouldn't* do." Mike snorted.

Max opened her mouth to protest, and then closed it with a shrug. "Yeah you're probably right. I guess don't get caught then." She slapped a hand on both of their shoulders, and pushed in between them to join Lucas and Dustin just up ahead.

Mike and El hopped on his bike and pushed off, this time it was much less scary than the first, and El just watched the trees and houses zoom by as they rode. They got to the library in record time (most likely from Mike's sheer eagerness at finally being able to spend time with her). They found a cozy little corner to sit in, not much different from their spot at the schools library. El spread her books and papers out on the table and they got to work.

Aside from the stolen glances and cheeky flirting, the conversation was more or less completely school related. All the while, El thought about what it would be like to actually *date* Mike Wheeler. Surely it wouldn't be much different from their friendship, just with the added bonus of holding his hand and kissing him and having an actual excuse to spend as much time with him as possible.

'That sounds like heaven.' El mused as she watched him look over his notes.

Before either of them knew it, almost two hours had gone by. Equation after equation, formula after formula, variable after variable. El felt her mind start to go numb from the letters, and numbers, and shapes spinning around in it. They had made a lot of

progress, and Mike really was an excellent teacher, but El felt like if she had to solve one more problem she was going to overload and malfunction. So she closed her book together in a hard dull thud and stood up.

"Michael Wheeler, I think I am so bored I am actually going to die."

He eyed her suspiciously, feeling embarrassed for being so boring. Then he realized that they literally had not talked about *anything* but numbers since arriving, and he was a little bored too.

"Okay, well do you want to like... take a break?"

"No. I think we are done for the day." She started collecting her things, and stashing them back in her backpack. Mike felt a fleeting sense of panic. He had wasted the entire afternoon and hasn't talked to her about anything, or asked her any questions not pertaining to homework. He had blown his maybe one and only chance to have a meaningful conversation away from the prying ears of his stupid friends.

"Lets go do something fun." She said, leaning down to meet his gaze. He snapped to attention and smiled, realizing that their time together wasn't over. "I know the perfect thing, come on."

She offered her hand, and he took it. She didn't let it go until they were back outside and getting back onto his bike.

"Where too?" He asked once they were both situated.

"Main street. And step on it!" She wrapped her arms around him tightly and rested her chin on his shoulder. He felt her hot breath on his neck and it gave him goose bumps up and down his arms. He set out for Main.

El was feeling somewhat bold. If there was any kind of a future for the two of them, then he had to pass one final test of her own design.

She directed him to rest his bike in a narrow alleyway behind a dumpster. She was being oddly secretive about where they were headed, and a tiny part of himself wondered what kind of trouble she was getting him into, but he was having way too much fun to protest.

She grabbed his hand again and pulled him out onto the busy street. A couple of other pedestrians raised their eyebrows at the sight of Ted Wheeler's son holding hands with some street tough, but neither of them cared. They walked up about a block and she turned to him.

"This is the place!" She gestured at the tiny building nestled into the strip, with the door hanging ajar and a strange musky smell coming from inside. The windows were plastered with posters of angry looking men screaming into microphones, and a man (who was wearing makeup) with a lightning bolt across his face. She had taken him to the small Hawkins Record store. A store he had never been in because it had honestly always scared him a little. He knew Will and Jonathan liked to go, but Mike just wasn't interested in music enough to brave it on his own.

"Come on!" El grabbed his hand again and drug him inside.

'If she keeps holding my hand, I would probably follow her anywhere.' He thought to himself as he walked inside.

The interior wasn't really what he expected. He wasn't sure *what* exactly he expected, but it was much brighter, and friendlier than anticipated. Row after row of milk crates, carrying vinyls labeled with tiny hand written cards, made narrow pathways across the small shop. More posters covered the walls inside, he tried not to blanch at the ones depicting nudity and graphic violence. The man behind the counter knew El by name, and smiled at her from behind his magazine.

"Hey El, whos the square?" The man snickered, guestering his nose at Mike.

"Hey Randy, this is Mike. He's cool." She answered flatly. The man - Randy- shrugged and turned back to his zine. Mike figured that 'cool' meant a lot more in this context, it was like they had just spoken in secret code.

"Okay, Wheeler. What kind of music do you like?" El asked with a smile. He just shrugged.

"I'm not really sure... I'm not really a big music guy." He put his hands

in his pockets.

El's eyebrows lowered in a look of accusing confusion. Randy lowered his magazine again, making a similarly accusatory face. "Okay well... um.. What about a classic, Like The Runaways?" She asked.

Mike shook his head, and dropped his gaze to the floor. Randy scoffed from the corner.

"Okay... that's okay, not everyone like the Runaways.. Um what about The Misfits?" She sounded hopeful. He shook his head again. "The Talking Heads?" Another sullen shake. "The Violent femmes?" Her helpfulness was floating when he shook his head yet again.

"The Cramps? Black Flag? Joy Division!? The Clash!?" By the end Mike's neck was sore from shaking, and El's eyes were wide with bewilderment.

"I think Will likes the Clash, but I have only ever listened to them in Jonathan's car." He mumbled.

"Yeah El, real cool." Randy snorted, flipping a page and scoffing.

"Alright, Wheeler. We have our work cut out for us." She shook off her astonishment and suddenly looked determined, like she was on a mission to save mankind, because in her mind, she was.

She pulled him to the back of the store and directed him to sit on a little rickety stool. She slapped a pair of headphones over his ears and worked the controls of an old record player. She walked over to a section marked 'Punk' and flipped through the records until she found what she was looking for.

"Okay, you remember that mixed tape I let you borrow?" Her voice was muffled slightly from under his headphones but he nodded. "What do you remember liking?"

Mike thought for a moment. He had only gotten to listen to it once or twice, and he was honestly too busy gushing over the girl that gave it to him to actually pay attention to it.

"Um there was one that was... kind of slow? I think it was track

three."

El grinned and nodded, shuffling her stack of vinyls to find the right one. "Okay Mike, this is David Bowie's 'Space Oddity' and if you don't like it, then you don't have working eardrums." With a smirk she put the record in place, and set it in motion with the needle.

The song started out, and Mike was a little surprised. It was mellow, much more mellow than he remembered, and it definitely sounded a million times better on this sound system rather than the dinky handed down walkman from Nancy. The voice was a little harsh, but in a really nice way. The melody was simple, the words catchy, and then all of the sudden, *boom*.

It hit him like an explosion. The chorus kicked in, the guitar looped back on itself, the pitch rose, it was entrancing. Mike felt goosebumps flood his skin for the second time that day, and he honestly couldn't decide which time had been better.

El smiled knowingly at the look of astonishment on his face. She remembered when Kali brought her to a little record store like this for the first time. She remembered sitting on the little stool, and having the same, almost spiritual, moment of understanding. Mike was hooked, and she couldn't be more proud.

She flew the the shelves, and fished a handful of 7 inches, as well as a few more LP's and stacked them up on the floor. Playing one after another.

Devo. Black Flag, The Cure. Suicidal Tendencies. The Runaways. Blonde. The Clash. Bad Brains. The Vapors. The Pixies.

All of it amazing, all of it entrancing. By the end El had her face squished to his so they could share the headphones, and his head was spinning. Some songs were angry, and fueled him to want to get up and dance. Some were deeply intense, and made him want to cry and scream. Some made him want to tell his dad to 'fuck off' the way he always imagined. Some made him feel like he was floating through space.

El hummed along, and pointed out which ones were her favorite and

why. Mike couldn't help his adoration when she would sing along, or when she pulled the headphones out and let the music fill the small space. She spun around in the aisles, and sang into her fist like a microphone. Mike tried to dance with her, but he was horrible offbeat, not that she cared. After what felt like a lifetime of new emotions and experiences, she finally put away the last record, and flipped off the player.

"So what did you think?" She asked, leaning against a shelf and smiling at him.

"I had no idea that music could be so... so-" He trailed off, not knowing if there was even a word for how he felt.

"Breathtaking?" El asked with a smirk.

"thought-provoking?" Randy asked from a couple of rows over. He had gotten on helping El inform this 'pitiful, uneducated, heartbreakingly disregarded fool' as he put it.

"Awe-inspiring." He sighed, still feeling dazed.

"Exactly!" El beamed. "Awe-inspiring. Maybe next week we should come back and you can buy your first *real* tape."

Mike nodded excitedly, but Randy shook his head.

"No, no this cannot stand. The boy has felt Music's raw power, and if I let him go a week without being able to experience it, I won't be able to sleep at night." Randy made his way to the back counter, and pulled a small box of tapes from a shelf. "Here, kid. This a mixtape of all the best stuff. Enjoy your new life." Randy placed the tape in Mike's hand and patted him on the shoulder.

"Thank you, Randy. This is so nice." Mike smiled down at the little tape. Mike couldn't help but feel this was like in a movie, when the superhero was given the tools he needs to save the world, and to take over the role of his predecessor.

"Don't thank me little dude, it's my duty." Randy put the case back and leaned across the counter. "You getting anything today El?"

"No, I think if I spend any more money on tapes Hop is going to have a stroke." El chuckled. Randy nodded and began closing the store down. He had actually stayed open an hour later than normal because this was 'too important to stop' and 'Rock and Roll has no curfew, man'.

El and Mike collected their things and got ready to leave. Mike flipped the little tape around in his palms, as if it were sacred. On their way out, Randy called to them from the back room.

"Come back next week! We are getting some new Zeppelin presses! And bring this little dexter with you. He's not so cool, but he's a punk rocker. I can sense it."

"Bitchin', see ya Randy." El smiled and closed the door behind her just as the neon open sign shut off.

They walked back to Mike's bike, but he pushed it alongside them instead so they could talk longer as they went. They talked about music mostly, tail-spinning into an almost cryptically deep conversation about it. It was a whole new world for Mike, and it was one El was more than excited to share. He had passed her little test with flying colors.

Once they reached the crest of El's street, El dug in her bag for a pack of cigarettes, lighting one as they walked.

"Why do you do that?" Mike questioned, face scrunching as the bitter smoke floated between them.

El considered the small cigarette in between her fingers and shrugged. It seemed like so long ago that she had started, when Kali offered her one as a child. Back then it just seemed like something to do because everyone else did. It seemed like part of her identity as a street kid, but now it was a habit that she honestly didn't even think about as being strange anymore.

"I don't know, I just have been for a long time I guess." She took a long drag and exhaled.

"Well... you know it's like, bad for you right?" He asked, pushing the

bike next to himself but not taking his eyes off of her.

"Yeah I know. Hopper hates it, and he asked me to stop when I first started living with him but it's just like... this weird comfort thing now I guess. It helps me calm down and it reminds me of people that I miss." El became a bit embarrassed. It dawned on her that the only other teenagers who smoked were all of the gross mouthbreathers and assholes, and it felt weird to be included in that category.

"I guess that makes sense." Mike added a bit hesitant. He was trying to be understanding but it just seemed like such a nasty habit.

"Maybe I should try to stop." El sighed, exhaling another plume of grey smoke into the sky. Mike didn't say anything, but El could tell by the look in his eyes that he agreed. She threw the small stick on the ground and squashed it under her heavy boots.

"There, that will be my last one." She smiled, feeling somewhat reluctant at waste a perfectly good cigarette.

"Good for you El. I know it can't be easy to quit a habit like that, but I would hate for you to get sick." He grinned sideways at her and she chuckled.

"Yeah I guess maybe I should stick around a little bit longer huh?" She elbowed his side and he laughed with her.

"Uh yeah." Mike muttered feeling flustered. He found himself watching her as she walked ahead of him. He felt himself reeling, feeling like he was falling backwards into something, but in a good way. El was just so... amazing! And spontaneous, and cool, and considerate, and thoughtful. She was constantly blowing his mind, and warping his entire world view. He had never known about anarchy, or rebellion, or music, or being conscious in thought. Hawkins just seemed so small and insignificant, and now he knew someone so much bigger and better than everything that had come before. She opened his mind and challenged him. He had always been smart, and wise well beyond his years, but El made him *think*, like really think.

He jogged forward a few steps to match her pace again. She turned

and smiled at him with that little smile that always made him feel like the oxygen was leaving his lungs.

"So..." El said after they walked a bit further. "You like music now? Like really like music?"

"Yeah totally! I didn't know there was so much good music out there. I didn't know it could be so..." The world eluded him, until he saw Els hopeful gaze. "Amazing."

"Good! That means I can take you to a concert this weekend." She stated as if it were already a plan in motion. He stopped dead in his tracks.

"A concert!?" He gaped. El whirled around to face him with an eyebrow raised.

"Yes a concert. Like the kind with a band playing music and people dancing." She joked.

"No I know what a concert is I just... Have never been to one. I didn't know bands played shows in Hawkins." He put his hands in his coat pocket like a nervous defense mechanism.

"Well they don't. It's in Chicago, its this totally choice band, Fugazi. We have to take the bus but Max and I are going and I really wanted you to come with me, but I needed to make sure you would actually enjoy the experience." Noticing his awkward posture, she mirrored him by crossing her arms.

"I don't know El, that seems like kind of... a lot..." He didn't know how else to put it. A concert sounded like a place for *cool* people, with lots of drunken idiots and socializing. He felt like he was definitely not the right kind of date to a punk show in the city.

"I promise it's not scary or anything. It will be fun, like an adventure. And I have really missed the city, and I haven't been to a show in ages." El beamed at him, recalling her various memories of shows with Kali. Swaying in the back of the venue, laughing and having fun. Those were some of her best memories from before.

"I'm sure it's fun I just... don't really think i'm the right person to go

with you... I don't think *I* would have fun with you." He stared at the ground. El furrowed her eyebrows, feeling offended and not really understanding why.

"So you don't want to go with me?"

"It's not that it's just... I don't know if you would have a good time if I was there." He tried his best to explain.

"Oh."

"Yeah..." Mike looked up at her through the hair that fell in his eyes. She didn't look happy, but she didn't look pissed either. Just kind of disappointed.

"Jeez Wheeler, once a square always a square huh?" She meant it to be teasing, but her tone was... off, clearly exhibiting the frustration she was feeling.

Mike face creased, feeling offended. "I mean... I guess. I just don't think I would fit in, ya know, with all the-"

"All the what?" She interrupted, matching his sarcastic tone. "Freaks?"

"Well yeah kind of. Not that I think you're a freak but... you know."

"Whatever. It's fine if you don't want to go... I get it. I just thought that if we went together then it would be like a fun date or something." El blushed, more out of embarrassment of the idea than of admitting her motive.

"Well it's not like we are dating." As soon as he said it he wished he could have taken it back. They weren't dating, but that wasn't the point. He liked spending time with her regardless of any label. It just slipped. Maybe it was his own frustration with being to chicken to make a move, or maybe he was just flustered. Either way, the hurt was written across El's face.

"No. I guess we aren't." She turned and started walking towards home again. She didn't expect him to be over the moon about the idea, but she also didn't expect him to say no. And she really didn't expect this to turn into some kind of argument.

"No El wait! It's not because of you or anything. Its me, i'm just..." Mike started.

"Don't give me the 'its not you, it's me' speech, Wheeler." El interrupted with more malice than intended.

"What!? I'm not! I'm not giving you any speech i'm just trying to explain." He felt himself get defensive.

"No Mike I understand. You don't want to go with me. Just say that, don't give me some bullshit breakup line." She didn't know why she was so hurt, or why her words were coming out so angry.

"It's not a bullshit breakup line! We don't even have anything to 'breakup' from!" He air quoted the word, feeling angrier and angrier.

El paused. His words punched her in the gut. But he wasn't wrong. She suddenly felt so embarrassed for phrasing it that way, or insinuating anything. They were not together, he didn't have any obligations to her. If he didn't want to go to a concert with her that was fine, because he wasn't her *boyfriend* and he didn't need to. She wanted to apologize, to take it all back and forget it, but her pride got the best of her.

"I guess you're right. We don't have anything." Her voice choked in her throat. She turned around again and walked faster down the hill to her house. She didn't stop when Mike ran to catch up to her again. She didn't stop when he yelled for her to wait, and she didn't stop when he finally gave up and headed home. She didn't stop until she was in her room, trying not to cry.

'Stupid stupid stupid! You aren't his girlfriend! You have no reason to be so upset! To be so petty!' She yelled at herself, trying desperately to stop this little pity party.

She talked herself in circles. She knew Mike cared about her, but now she wasn't sure how much. She knew they *had* liked each other as more than friends, but maybe that changed. She knew she had gotten angrier than she needed too, but it really couldn't be helped.

El had a temper, and Mike wasn't much better. Maybe she just got

her hopes up to high. Maybe she just really wanted things to be perfect and magical and easy, but they weren't. Everything is always so difficult. She felt herself starting to sink, berating herself with malice and hatred, and then back-peddling and worrying she was making a bigger deal out of this than was needed, and then the cycle would repeat.

She always said the wrong things. She always pushed people away, and Mike was just another person on that list. She ruined things before they started, and it wasn't something Mike deserved.

She almost called him. Hell, she almost ran out into the street in hopes that he was still out there. But she didn't. Instead she took a long shower to calm down, and went to bed early.

The next morning, El woke up to the sounds of Hopper leaving for work. She was thankful he worked Saturdays, and even more thankful he had bought her lie about staying at Max's house tonight. In retrospect, he probably didn't, but he trusted her enough to not get herself into anything too stupid.

So much for that.

She jumped out of bed and ran to call Max, confirming their plans for that evening. She made breakfast, and waiting for her friend to get there, and tried as hard as she could not to think about Mike.

'We aren't anything.' She told herself every time she looked at the phone, or saw something that reminded her of him. *'We aren't anything.'*

Max showed up a little before noon, giving them plenty of time to get ready, catch a bus to Chicago, and get to the venue before doors opened. El didn't tell Max about her fight (Was it a fight?) with Mike. Instead she made up some excuse that he was busy. Max bought it, or at least pretended too.

The two girls listened to music loud, and got ready. El lent Max some of her more 'concert appropriate' attire. She even agreed to let El do her makeup. Once they were both strapped head to toe in leather and

ripped up stocking, with eyes rimmed in inky black eyeshadow, they left for the train station.

At some point during the night, El's anxiety transformed into anger. Anger with herself, anger with the fight, anger with letting her ego get the better of her, anger at ruining what could have been a perfectly amicable disagreement with someone who didn't deserve her backlash. Being mad isn't better than feeling low, but at least it's easier to cope with. She just turned her music up a little louder, and danced around a little wilder.

'You don't deserve someone as thoughtful as Mike. You don't deserve someone like him when you treat him like garbage, and run away. All you do is run away.'

Those were the only thoughts she let slip into the forefront. Her and Mike weren't anything. Regardless of any emotional connection, or his promises to always be there for her, he didn't owe her anything. He clearly didn't like her enough to take this risk, and that was just going to have to be fine.

El managed to push any concern for Mike to the furthest part of her mind. She focused instead on the songs playing from her Walkman that Max and her crammed together to listen to on the long train ride. She thought about how excited she was to see the city again, to bask in the glow of neon lights, and hear the sounds of bustling crowds of people. She thought about how much fun they would have at the show, and how exciting it would be to be a part of the underground revolution again, even if it was only for the night.

And somewhere else, in the back of her mind, she thought about that impossibly slim chance that maybe, just maybe, she would see her sister again.

9. 9) Boys Don't Cry

Hello Everyone! Thank you all for your amazing comments as usual, and a special thank you to those who shared there own stories with the things we have covered in the story so far. It means so much that you are connecting with my writing in that way!

Hope you enjoy this chapter (dont hate me lol)

January 8th, 1988

Mike thought about his *almost* fight with El the entire bike ride home. He thought about when he was brushing his teeth, and when he was lying awake in bed.

She had been so *angry* out of seemingly nowhere. He knew she had a bit of a temper, and he knew he wasn't much better, but she had never directed any of it at him before. He knew that most of her aggression came from a place of self doubt, of feeling insecure and alienated. He concluded somewhere in the endless stream of self pity that she was probably just embarrassed, got her feeling hurt, and her hopes up.

'I should have just said yes!' He thought to himself when he couldn't sleep. *'It probably would have been fun! I would have had fun with El, and it would have made her so happy!'*

He knew that he wasn't exactly at fault, because the fact of the matter was that he and El were *not* dating, but he had messed up, and big time. He had spent so long trying to prove that he was going to be there for her, that all of her friends would always support her, but when the time came he let his own insecurities prevent him from doing just that.

It was just so mind-boggling that she wanted him to go in the first place. He was so far out of his comfort zone, and she wanted to push him even further. He realized somewhere along the way that he *wanted* to get out of the little safe bubble he had put himself in. He had known the same people, had the same friends, lived in the same

house, done the same things, for his entire life! El made him feel almost invincible. Like he was more than just a nerd, more than just frogface, more than just a suburban dweeb with a crush on a girl so far out of his league it should be criminal.

When he woke up in the morning, knowing that El was somewhere in town probably hating him, he made a plan. He threw on his clothes and ran downstairs, telling his mom some excuse about staying the night at Will's, and hopping on his bike.

He thought about stopping by El's house, but he knew they would have had to leave early to catch the bus, and he had stayed up so late worrying that he slept in.

He rode down the familiar street, and threw his bike down on the Byers lawn. When he knocked, Joyce was surprised to see him, but as welcoming as always.

"Will should be in his room, go ahead in." She said with a smile, stepping out of the way so he could get inside.

"Um... actually I was hoping Jonathan was home?" He mumbled, not making eye contact.

Joyce took a step back and frowned confusedly. "He is working the morning shift right now, but He should be home around 4?"

"Okay great, thank you!" He stepped past, trying not to seem totally suspicious, and walked into Will's room.

"Hey Mike! Did we make plans to hang out today?" Will asked, looking up from behind his sketch pad in bed.

"No no, I just... I need a favor."

"Okay yeah, what's up?" Will set down his paper and pencil and shuffled the art supplies on his bed so Mike would have a place to sit down.

"What do you know about a band called um..." He tried to remember the band El had said last night... it was something with a funny sounding name. Fuges? Fuzzies? "Fugazi?"

"Fugazi? Um nothing really. I think that Jonathan listens to them but they are pretty new I think." Will said, pondering his second hand knowledge.

"He does!? Good! Because they are playing a show tonight and I want to go."

Will's mouth dropped as if Mike had just spoken another language. "You? Want to go to a..."

"A concert. Yeah I know it's crazy but El and Max are going and I said I didn't want to go last night and we kind of got into a fight but now I really want to go and Jonathan is the only person I think of to ask for a ride." Mike felt himself rambling, all the thoughts he had had over the last twelve hours coming out in a stream.

"Um okay. I'm sure he could take you when he gets home... Where is it?"

"In Chicago."

"Chicago!?" Will yelled.

"Shhh! Keep your voice down, our parents can't know about this! My mom would never let me go in a million years and I told her I was staying at your house tonight." Mike looked over his shoulder to make sure Joyce wasn't eavesdropping.

"Mike this is crazy. We can't just... go to a concert over an hour away in Chicago!" Will's face was frozen in a look of comical horror.

"Why not? It will be like an adventure." Mike recalled the word El used last night.

"I mean I guess but..." Will started.

"Are you in or are you out?" Mike interrupted, looking stern, trying to show he meant business. He was going to that damn concert with or without Will (he just prayed it would be with.)

Will contemplated for a moment, looking around his room as if he would see something he could use as an excuse. "Okay fine, we'll go."

But your girlfriend has made you totally crazy." Will scoffed.

"She isn't my girlfriend!" Mike groaned. He remembered the way she had looked at him so abjectly. '*We aren't anything.*' For a moment he worried if all of this was a mistake, but the sound of someone opening the door shook him from another tail spin of self doubt.

"Mike? Mom said you wanted to talk to me?" Jonathan stood in the doorway in his work uniform, looking completely bewildered.

"Uh Yeah! What are you doing tonight?" Mike turned around to face him.

"Sleeping. I have another shift tomorrow at like 3 am." The older boy groaned just thinking about it.

"Damn it!" Mike huffed.

"What do you know about Fugazi?" Will said as if it were some sort of secret government conspiracy.

"Fugazi? Why?" Jonathan asked stunned.

"Because they are playing a show tonight and Mike wants to go." Will answered looking at his dejected friend, currently moping on the edge of his bed.

"You want to go to a concert?" He scoffed.

"Yeah I know it's the news of the freaking century! Yes I want to go and I was hoping you could take me." Mike threw himself down onto the bed, with his arms up in the air in exasperation.

Jonathan could see he was upset, about more than just the concert from the looks of it. He rubbed the back of his neck searching for some way to help them out, but a yawn broke his concentration. "I don't think I can, guys. Im sorry."

Mike groaned, and Will flashed his brother an understanding smile before he left the room. Mike put his arms across his eyes and fumed, feeling sorry for himself all over again.

'Who was i kidding? I could never be brave or adventurous! And the universe knows it!'

"Who else has a car?" Will asked, rubbing his chin. Mike peeped at him from under his arms, his face plastered with a frown. It made him feel a little better that Will wasn't willing to give up yet.

"Nancy, but she is away at school." Mike groaned again. Mike ran through the others on his list of licensed drivers, but no one seemed right. Joyce would probably take them, but showing up to a concert with a mom was probably the best way to ruin his chance at ever seeming cool. His parents were obviously out of the question, as was the Chief. Turns out he really didn't know that many people with cars, and borrowing one would be to suspicious.

"We could ask that dude that Dustin hangs out with." Will said with a cringe. Clearly his list of possible choiffers came up just as short.

"Steve Harrington?" Mike sneered, moving to sit back up, his face twisted in disgust.

"Yeah why not? You are kind of desperate aren't you?"

"I mean I guess..." Mike flopped down again.

"Then let's go!" Before Mike could protest, Will was jumping out bed and pulling on a hoodie. Mike felt too mopey to go anywhere, and he wasn't really even sure where they were going to, but he put his shoes back on anyway. The two hoped on their bikes, waved goodbye to Ms. Byers, and rode to Dustin's house.

Lucas was over, and the two were rewatching 'Back to the Future' for probably for the millionth time. Mike and Will ran through the same spiel, about the concert, and wanting to surprise El, and the almost-fight they got in, and Jonathan not being able to take them, and being desperate, and El '*definitely*' not being his girlfriend, and some teasing, and then the plan was settled.

Dustin ran into the kitchen and dialed the number he had memorized. The other boys crowded around the phone to listen, but it was still mostly a one sided conversation.

"Steve!" Dustin hollered through the phone sounding chipper. "What are you doing tonight?"

There was a sigh, and a mumble in reply.

"Great! Now you do have plans! Be here in ten minutes." Dustin smiled. There was another sigh from the other end and then a vague sounding agreement and the line went dead.

Lucas cheered, and donned his bandana, Will jumped in excitement for getting to go to his first punk rock show, and Dustin just seemed proud that he had talked Steve into another hair-brained adventure. None of the boys really understood 'King Steve's' relationship with Dustin, or how a babysitting gig had become a friendship, but the curly haired kid hadn't been bullied in months, so it had to be doing some good.

While the boys all waited outside for Steve, giddy with anticipation, Mike felt like his heart was going to beat out of his chest. It felt like he was making a huge mistake, and yet, it felt like it would be an even worse mistake to stay home. He talked himself around in circles, one moment berating himself for having any feelings for El at all, and the very next moment telling himself that it didn't matter because his feelings for her were so strong.

A lot of it wasn't even about El entirely. It was more about the idea that she offered. A chance to do something unexpected, to learn something he had never considered, to challenge the rules and lessons Mike had come to know as fact. He wanted to challenge his own expectations of himself, and he wanted to prove to El once and for all that his friendship with her was absolute.

He wasn't quite sure how his plan of surprising El had turned into an entire party field trip, or how a very grumpy Steve had become their ride, but he was way too lost in his own train of thoughts to worry about that now.

He was going to do this because he liked El, more than he had ever liked anyone before, and she made him want to try new things even when it scared him. He was going to tell her how he felt even if she blew him off and never talked to him again, because she deserved to

know, and he deserved to tell her.

The boys didn't really know what to expect from the nightlife of a big city, or exactly what going to a punk show downtown meant, but it was still the furthest thing from whatever they imagined. Sure they had all been to the big city a time or two, on vacation, or for a science fair, but seeing it at night was a completely different world altogether.

Skyscrapers towered above them, dotted with the yellow glow from their inhabitants. Distant sounds of police sirens and the ambient white noise of traffic filled their senses. They knew where the concert was from a little bit of Jonathan's help, and Steve turned out to be a pretty good navigator. Each turn and exit took him deeper into the heart of downtown.

The magic of the city faded, replacing penthouse high rises with dilapidated warehouses. Fancy restaurants were replaced with bail bond shops and pawn stores. The streets were littered with drunken bums, and angry looking deadbeats. The alleyways and buildings were all painted different shades of neon from the signs overhead that flickered and pulsated. People waited outside of clubs in long lines, the music coming from inside was loud and reverberated off the concrete. It was like the city had a heartbeat.

Steve stopped outside of some bar and asked if anyone knew where the show was happening to make sure they were in the right place. After a couple of miss directions, eventually they were driving down a long road, surrounded by people who looked straight out of a magazine. Leather, studs, mohawks, clothes ripped, piercings, chains, and the unforgettable sounds of angry music coming from inside one of the buildings.

They spilled out of Steve's car after he found a place to park, and they ran up to the building that people were coming in and out of. There wasn't a lot of systems in place, as far as any of them could tell, not even a bouncer, but that didn't stop them from getting some deservedly strange looks as they walked inside. Mike looked at his friends with their bright-eyed faces, and star wars shirts, they definitely didn't look the part. He took a deep breath and pushed past

a group of drunken burnouts to step inside.

Once in the venue, the sea of people that stretched before them was like a breeding ground of anger and destruction. The music was loud and screechy, the people danced around haphazardly. People spilled drinks, others made out in the dark hallway, others fought each other off to the side. Mike gulped and tried to steady himself, suddenly feeling like finding anyone in this mess was a lost cause, especially considering so many the girls here looked and dressed just like El.

He swallowed hard and pushed his way through the crowd, crossing the dance floor and narrowly avoiding a stray fist to the face. There were steps along the opposite side of the venue, and he hoped the added height would give a better vantage point. He almost wished that Lucas had brought his binoculars.

He stepped up into a small space between two idiots yelling along sloppily to the song, and Will stood down just a step below him. He wasn't sure where Lucas and Dustin were, but he figured they were probably better off sticking with Steve in the background. He was searching the rows upon rows of people when he saw something he recognized.

There, close to the stage, was a head of familiar bright red hair, dancing (or thrashing) along with the song.

Mike hopped off the step and pushed his way forward, squeezing in between people and fighting the urge to say 'excuse me' over and over again. Once he got closer, he felt his heart drop to see that while it was in fact Max, El was nowhere in sight. He reached forward and tapped her on the shoulder.

"What!?" Max spun around, hands balled into fists as if she was ready to fight. Her eyes went from piercing to wide the instant they landed on Mike's awkward, crooked grin. "Wheeler!? What the hell are you doing here!?" She screamed over the music.

"I came to find El!" Mike screamed back, his words lost in a guitar solo.

"What!?" Max leaned closer to him to try to hear.

"I came to- Oh never mind, come with me!" He grabbed her wrist and led her back towards the steps where Will was still waiting. Max's face went wide again when she saw Byers swaying by himself. "I said, that I came to find El."

"Oh Jesus, Wheeler. You came all the way out here to surprise your girlfriend? Why didn't you just come with us?" She crossed her arms, her normal Max smirk settling back into place.

"She isn't my- Ugh forget it. It's kind of a long story. Anyway, where is she?" He glanced behind her to see if maybe she had somehow followed behind.

"Hell if I know. She fucking ditched me to go hang out with some total gutter punks." Max scoffed, flipping her hair and looking pissed.

"You just let her leave with some strangers!?" Mike's mouth fell open.

"Relax, Wheeler! She said that she knew them and like, I couldn't really talk her out of it." She sighed and looked back to the band on stage. They were playing a slightly slower song, and Mike thanked heavens that he could finally hear himself think again. "They went out the back exit, they might still be out in the alley way."

Mike's head snapped up to the small illuminated exit sign hanging behind on the doors. "Thanks Max!" Before she or Will could say anything, he was moving through the crowd again. He felt like he was finally getting good at it, pushing and shoving, and slithering through. That was, until he got knocked in the face by a rogue elbow. He stumbled back, and immediately tasted the metallic din of blood on his tongue. His entire head throbbed, but it was impossible to tell where it had even come from. He pressed forward, clearing the last row of people and pushing the exit door open.

He practically collapsed once he got outside. The air was no longer sticky with sweat and condensed body heat, and it was so much quieter that his ears rang. There were a few groups of people sitting around with beers, or leaning up against buildings chatting about who knows what. Mike looked up and down the alley. He didn't see anything he recognized, but he did hear a faint laugh. The same laugh he had heard that day in Mr. Thompson's classroom, the same

laugh he heard at the arcade, the library, and the movie theater, and when they sat next to each other at lunch. The same laugh that sent chills up his spine and made his head feel swimmy.

He turned in the direction it had come from, and his heart stopped. There at the end of the long ally, sitting inside a dimly illuminated van, was El. She had her head thrown back in laughter, the cars overhead light shining from behind her making it look like she had a glowing aura, like an angel, or an ethereal alien. She looked alluring, her slicked back hair and smokey framed eyes, her hot red lipstick, and leather skirt. She looked like a part of the crowd to a T, but she was by far the most beautiful girl Mike had seen all night.

'Or my entire life.' He thought taking a few hesitant steps forward.

The closer he got, the more that lovestruck feeling dissipated and was replaced with heart-wrenching anxiety.

'What if she tells me she never wants to see me again? What if she hates me? What if one of the new guys she is sitting with is her boyfriend now and I totally blew it?'

He watched the group of people she was sitting and talking too. They all looked more like her, more *cool*. She had a cigarette between her fingers. So much for quitting. There were a few girls with her two, they all had dyed hair and ripped up clothes. El was leaning up against one of them. A girl with purple hair teased up tall and pushed over to the side.

It finally dawned on him for the first time what exactly the feeling that El gave him was. Not the one that made him blush and act stupid, that one was clear, but the one that made him feel almost sick. El intimidated him. She intimidated him in a way that he had never experienced before. She wasn't a bully, she had never really been anything but kind to him (unless she was being unkind to herself) but she just made him feel so... small. Mike felt his stomach bubble over and fought the urge to turn on his heels and run. He was too close for that now.

"E... El?" Mikes voice was a tiny whisper compared to the sounds of their conversation and the muffled music still playing inside. "El?" He

spoke up a bit louder this time.

In an instant all of the heads turned to look at him at once. He let out of a yelp of nerves and swallowed.

"What do we have here?" A tall lanky man with a mohawk and makeup as thick as El's sneered.

"Are you lost little boy?" A girl with multi-colored puffy hair and big bow asked with a condescending sweet voice.

"No i'm... im..." He tried to find the words to explain, but it was like he had forgotten everything in his brain. Everything but El's confused face when she finally turned to look at him.

"Mike!?" She gasped. Her mouth dropped open.

"You know this kid, Jane?" The girl with purple hair asked, glaring down at him from her seat. Her voice was venomous, with an accent Mike couldn't quite place.

"Yeah... I do." El breathed, standing up to get out of the van. She stepped down and landed just a few inches away from him. His breath hitched when she was suddenly so close, and hers did the same. "Mike, what are you doing here?"

"I... I felt so bad about yesterday. I was stupid and I should have just come with you and so I thought I would surprise you by showing up here and well... surprise!" He was rambling.

El scrunched her face in confusion. "No.. no Mike you had every right to not want to come. I'm sorry I got so upset I guess I just... got my hopes up..."

It was clear that she was alluding to something more.

"Well, it's okay. We are both sorry, and I forgive you, and I hope you forgive me, because i'm here now and I want to have fun with you and the rest of our friends and then we can go back to Hawkins later tonight and crash at like... Will's or something." He was still rambling. He always rambles when he's nervous, but this time it was worse because unbeknownst to himself, he had been planning every

step of their reunion in the back of his head somewhere amidst all of his reflection.

"Mike... I..." She started, turning around the look at her friends. They were all wearing similar looks of confusion, aside from Kali, who was looking just as indifferent as usual. "Mike i'm not going back to Hawkins."

"Wait, what?" His body felt like he had been plunged into a bath of ice water from the pure shock. Surely he had misheard.

"I'm not going back to Hawkins. I'm staying here with my sister and our friends. This is where I belong, Mike."

"What are you talking about!? What about Jim? What about Max?"

'What about me?'

"Max has Lucas now, and the rest of you, and Jim went his entire life without me. He will survive."

"No, El you can't just leave! Max loves you, and Hop he loves you too! And the party, all of us, we care about you so much, El"

El looked back nervously at her friends and grabbed Mikes hand, pulling him away from their prying ears and skeptical faces. She took him around the corner to an even smaller dead end alleyway that was more or less pitch black, save for a single red neon club Marquee humming above them. The atmosphere made her look even darker, even more vacant.

"Mike, you're hurt." She said softly, reaching out to touch the skin near his lips that were swollen and bruising quickly.

"El, don't change the subject." He stepped away from her touch. "Why are you going this?"

She took a deep breathe, biting her lips and clenching her jaw like she was swallowing something painful. When she opened her eyes again, any softness that had been in them was gone. She looked hollow.

"Mike. This is where I belong. I don't fit in in Hawkins, I don't fit in with The Party. When I get too close to people... I hurt them. You don't deserve that, none of you deserve that, and I just... i'm not happy in Hawkins. I'm not happy Mike."

El kept her gaze on the ground beneath her as she talked. Mike watched the pain and calculations swim through her eyes.

"You aren't going to be happy here either." His voice was breathless, like he couldn't quite get enough oxygen into his lungs.

"Maybe, maybe not. That isn't really the point anymore. But you would all be fine without me. You have each other, and I have my people. People more like me, who understand me. People who have my best interest at heart."

"I have your best interest at heart." Mike eyes stung with tears that threatened to spill. He could see written across her skin that she was lying, that she was destroying her own chance at happiness the way she always did. The way she thought she had too.

"I don't deserve you, Mike. I don't deserve any of you." She shook her head and rubbed at the thick black rings around her eyes. She turned from him and began the walk back to the van.

"El please..." Mike called out desperately, chasing after her back to where the van was sitting.

"Im sorry, Mike. Take Max home with you, and tell Hopper not to worry if he asks." She turned to look back at him, obviously deep in conflict. "Tell him it won't be like last time."

And with that, El slipped from his view into the van, closing the door behind her. Mike walked behind the van as it drove out of the ally way. He watch the back of Els head as she leaned against the glass window, and wiped under her eye. He wondered if she was crying. He told himself that she wasn't. He watched the van drive down the road and disappear under a bridge out of sight.

It felt like he had been gutted. The desperation seeping out of his chest was far more painful than the swelling in his lips. He had lost

her. She had lost herself.

The crowd inside the venue cheered, and Mike made his way back inside, his head hung low. He found that all of his friends had found each other, and were standing near the back of the theater. He didn't know he was crying until he had to tell them what El had just done. He didn't know he was tearing up until he saw Max turn to sob into Lucas shoulder.

Max screamed at him. Demanding that he should have done something to stop it all from happening, but even she knew that this wasn't something that could be helped. This was El's choice, even if it was the wrong one.

He felt nothing. The entire car ride back to Will's house, the entire time he brushed his teeth, the entire time he layed in his sleeping bag wide awake while Will snored above him. He felt like a part of himself was gone forever. Not because the girl he had a crush on was gone, but because she felt like nothing in her new life was worth sticking around for. He knew about Kali, El's *sister* from the handful of stories she had told him, and she wasn't the type of person El needed. She seemed reckless, and dangerous, and wild. El was thoughtful, and passionate, and wise.

He genuinely couldn't understand why the hell someone like that would think so little of themselves. Why someone so amazing would punish herself in a vain attempt at bettering the people she cared about. She was delusional, and a part of Mike was angry. Not with her, but for her, because she had gone her entire life thinking she was disposable, so that's how she treated herself. He didn't know what it would take to make her think otherwise, but there was nothing on Earth that would keep him from trying.

He laid down that night and he found he couldn't sleep again, and for the second night in a row, he made a plan. The outcome really could go either way, but he had to try. He would have done the same for any of his friends without a question, and El was his friend whether she liked it or not.

10. 10) She's A Little Runaway

So! Only a few more chapters to go, and I promise that after this, the angst will (more or less) be over! I just felt it was really important to get in depth on El's struggles. thank you all for reading, and for your lovely comments. Sorry its stressing some of yall out, its stressing me out to write! Like cant they just kiss and be happy already? Sheesh.

Hope you enjoy!

Mike jumped up from his bed on the floor of Will's room the minute light began streaming through the window. He hadn't slept much anyway, and had been awake for almost an hour already. He threw on his clothes from the pile on the floor, borrowing a shirt of Jonathan's from the hamper, it was amazing how the stink of sweat and booze from a concert really sticks to you, and grabbed his backpack. He was almost out the door when Will's sleepy voice startled him from his determined focus.

"Where are you going? It's like 7am." Will had sat up in bed, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

"Will, I have to go tell Hopper about El. I know that she asked me not too but..."

"Well yeah, of course you need to tell him." Will was suddenly awake and alert. "I mean, his only daughter goes a-wall and decides to run away out of nowhere?"

Mike was happy his friend understood. The entire drive back to Hawkins last night had been mostly silent and tense, other than Max swinging back and forth between rage that El was being so selfish, and bitterly sobbing on Lucas's shoulder. Mike had explained El's wish to not let anyone else know, and no one could really understand where she was coming from. For them, it was totally out of the blue. They didn't know about her past the way Mike did.

"Its... complicated, Will. Like really really complicated and fucked up

and..."

"Why don't you tell me." Will interrupted what he had assumed would be another one of Mike's famous rambles. He was right. Mike sighed and dropped into Will's desk chair.

He explained everything. About El being adopted, about her living in foster home after foster home. He explained that she had run away before to live with her foster sister, and that they stayed in some abandoned warehouse. He told his friend everything that he knew, while Will listened in intently and thoughtfully as he always did. When Mike was finished, Will said nothing. He nodded and stepped out of bed.

"Mike, do whatever you think is best. It sounds like El has a lot of pain that she is holding on to, and running away... it's not the answer. She will realize that eventually, but right now she needs to know that you and Hopper are there for her even when she is pushing you away."

Mike nodded, and stood back up, throwing his backpack around his shoulders.

"And, Mike?" Will added just before Mike closed his bedroom door. "You need to tell her how you feel about her. Like how you *really* feel."

Mike said nothing, but he let his friends words sink in. He thought about it the entire way to Hoppers house. It seemed so simple and childish to imagine telling El that he *liked* her. Hell, he already had. It seemed like every time he tried to open up, something else got in the way. He figured that maybe that was El's plan. That she knew it was coming, and it scared her. It scared him too. All he knew was that Hopper needed to know, and they needed to bring her back.

To say that Chief Hopper was pissed, would be the understatement of the century. Mike watched the sheriffs face turn a shade of red he didn't even know was possible. Mike filled him in on the night, the concert, her secret plans to go to the city, and her running away with a girl named Kali.

Hopper was angry about all of it. About being lied too, about thinking he could trust her, about her foolish decisions. But mostly, he was just hurt. Hurt that she felt the need to run away at all. Hurt that she didn't feel content with the new life he had made for her. He felt an overwhelming mixture of anger, outrage, guilt, loss, and sorrow. So much so that he didn't say anything until he told Mike to get in his truck, and that they were going after her.

It was a little past 8:30 when they hit the road, meaning they wouldn't be in Chicago until after 10, even with Hoppers disregard for speed limits. Mike let his head swim with everything he wanted to say to El, and every fear he had.

'What if we can't find her? What if she doesn't want to come home? What if she hates me? What if she really is better off in the city? Kali is her sister after all, and she probably really missed her.'

"So..." Mike said, finally breaking the silence when his thoughts made him feel sick. "Do you know where she would go?"

"I have a hunch. She could be anywhere, but I know where to start." Hoppers knuckles were white on the steering wheel, and he hadn't stopped smoking since they pulled out of the driveway. "I will spend the rest of my goddamn life looking for her if I have too."

Mike was taken aback by Hoppers words, and his firm tone. Mike had only known Hop by the vague things that El had told him. That he was a hard ass, but he meant well. That they fought a lot, even though she knew he was just trying to do what he thought was best. Maybe El thought she was doing what was best too.

"And Kali? They were foster siblings before you adopted her?" Mike was honestly just trying to draw out more information.

Hopper scoffed and sighed, reaching his hand out the window to flick his cigarette butt out onto the pavement as they sped down the highway. "Yeah something like that. El thinks of Kali as some kind of role model. Like she is some all knowing being. Kali screwed with her head, more than anything else."

"What do you mean?" Mike asked sincerely.

Hopper considered the kid next to him for a moment. He knew that Mike was a good kid, and that they had never seen much of each other, which meant he stayed out of trouble. He had also heard El talk about him on more than one occasion. Even with her attempts at aloofness, it was easy to spot her infatuation with Ted Wheeler's brainiac of a son. He figured that if this kid was willing to put whatever he had on the line to go after a girl he had only known for a few months, that maybe he deserved to know the truth.

"Kali likes to get into... trouble." Hopper chose the word carefully. "Her and her little gang thought they were Harbingers of change, that they could make the world a better place by graffiting buildings, and protesting, and being general pains in my ass. Kali and El had been brought into the station a few times, involved in this or that, mostly just slap on the wrist stuff. I let them off easy because I knew they were in the system. But Kali took it too far. One of her friends torched a building, nearly killed a dozen people."

Mike's eyes widened. He had no idea that it had been so serious.

"It wasn't enough for Kali though. She wanted the people she felt were responsible for her abuse to pay the ultimate price. She wanted them dead. El was smart enough to get out of the picture when things got dark. Her little friends went on the run, leaving her behind as a kid to starve and freeze to death. A team of my guys went through their old hideout and found her. She was passed out from starvation. She spent a week in the hospital, and when she was released I had already adopted her. We moved back to my hometown after a year or so and never looked back. At least, I thought we wouldn't look back. I thought it was best."

Mike absorbed everything. Feeling shaken from the new information. Suddenly everything made a lot more sense. El was afraid of being abandoned, and despite her own sister leaving her, they had a connection that was deep and unbreakable. She was confused, and manipulated, and probably in just as much pain as she had put Hopper in.

"I think it was the right thing to do." Mike finally said. "Bringing her to Hawkins. It's obvious that she hasn't had a lot of people in her life who cared about her, but now she does. My friends and I, we really

like her. She is an amazing person, and she just needs to know that we aren't going to leave."

Hopper nodded, surprised by Mike's wisdom. "Are you and El... like dating?" He said gruffly, sarcasm twisting in his voice.

Mike jumped in his seat and turned around to face the man next to him so fast it nearly gave him whiplash. Hopper would have chuckled under any other circumstances.

"What!? No! I mean- not that I wouldn't want to, I mean! Shit! No, that's not what I meant- I just mean that like... We aren't. She doesn't, and I don't..." Mike stammered a million miles a minute, growing more and more red by the second.

"Relax, Kid. You aren't in any trouble. She likes you, and you seem like a nice kid with a good head on your shoulders. I just thought I would ask. She doesn't exactly tell me everything." Hopper turned to look at a slack jawed Mike from the corner of his eye.

"Oh. Well... We aren't. Dating I mean, or anything like that. I mean, I like her and everything, but... We are just friends." Mike played with the hem of his jacket, feeling so embarrassed that he wanted to throw himself out the window.

Hopper hummed unconvinced in response. Mike wasn't exactly sure what it meant, but he had taken the chief's words to heart. It gave him a replenished sense of hope that maybe they would be able to talk some sense back into El. He sat back in his seat, and they spent the rest of the car trip in silence. Both of their minds racing at all of the questions that would hopefully be answered once in the city.

El had woken up early to the sounds of her friends chatting downstairs. She examined the room around her as she stretched and shook off the fog of sleep.

Nothing had changed much. The same old mattress on the floor, the same beat up arm chair in the corner, the same pile of dirty laundry that served as Kali's dresser. The same smell of cigarette smoke, and old industrial chemicals that still clung to the warehouse walls. It

almost felt like home, but not quite. She figured that that would come with time.

She had thought about Hopper all night. She thought about her room in Hawkins, and Max, and Dustin, and Will, and Lucas, and *Mike*. She hadn't let herself cry, not wanting to explain any of it to Kali, but she would have if she could have.

She wrapped herself in one of Kali's oversized jackets and stomped down the metal stairs to the main room of the warehouse. Everyone was awake already, talking about the show from the night before, and Kali offered a warm smile when she saw El come in.

"Morning sleeping beauty!" Dottie smirked from her seat on the makeshift kitchen counter.

"Morning." El mumbled. "Coffee?"

Funshine handed her a warm cup of dark roast, the kind she had had so many times before. She took a sip and grimaced, it was bitter and watery, not nearly as good as she remembered, and not nearly as good as Hopper's. Kali handed her a cigarette, and Axel lit it. They never really ate breakfast, never had the money or the means too, and a hot cup of joe and a cig could curb off the hunger that was growing in her stomach.

'Just like old times.' She sighed in her own head at the familiar combination.

"So, " Kali began, stepping up from her seat and crossing the kitchen to El. "Are you going to tell us what you have been doing all this time, Jane?"

El nearly choked on her second bitter sip. She had been expertly avoiding any and all questions about her whereabouts for the last few years. She didn't want her old family to learn about her new one. She wanted to leave everything that had happened to her in Hawkins behind. It killed her to think about how she probably hurt all of them very badly, or how she would never be able to see them again, but she knew it was for the best.

Her Hawkins family was full of good, caring people, and she didn't deserve any of them. Or at least, that's what she told herself. That they would wise up and leave her too, but this time it would hurt far too much, because they showed her what love looks like, and she couldn't risk falling too deep into their comforts, or having them then rip it away. She was like a scared child, afraid of losing the people she had cared about most, and deciding that running away and leaving them to move on was the best choice for their happiness.

Besides, Kail and the gang knew El better than anyone else. A part of her had desperately missed the radical and chaotic world of living on the streets, and fighting injustices wherever they lay. When she had seen Kali at the concert, and when Kali had actually *talked* to her, she realized that this is where she belongs. These are her people. No matter how much it hurts.

"Hello? Earth to Jane?" Axel scoffed, snapping El back into reality.

"Sorry... I guess I'm still a little tired." El took another sip of her drink and tried to steady herself. To think of a way to tell the story without actually telling the whole story. The last thing she needed was for her friends to know that not only had she totally sold out, and gone soft, but that she was living with a cop.

"After I um... ditched you guys a few years back, I came back here and waited for you to come home. You never did so I took off. I have been traveling around since." She tried to play it cool, and was impressed with how believable it was for being so on the spot.

"You traveled around alone?" Kali asked raising an eyebrow. Her signature facial expression showing that she wasn't buying the story.

"Doing what?" Mick added from her place by the lookout window.

"You know... just like messing around. Wasting time, sight seeing, going to shows. I did little odd jobs here and there. Other times I just stole to get from place to place." El intentionally kept her eyes away from Kali's. Her sister always had a way of knowing when someone was lying.

"Then who was that kid that came and talked to you before we left?"

Dottie asked, twirling her hair around fingers and smacking her gum.

"He definitely didn't look like any street kid I have ever seen. More like a little suburban dork." Axel chuckles to himself.

El took a deep breathe in through her teeth. She had been trying her hardest not to think about Mike, or what he had said to her the night before, or the way he looked when she drove away. In all honesty, it made her heart melt completely when she had seen that he came to the concert to surprise her, despite not wanting to. It took a lot of strength to stay in the van, and not run out into the street to hug him.

'This is for the best. You don't deserve him. He would be so much better off without a broken person like you in his life. He doesn't even like you anyway. You aren't anything.'

The words she had been telling herself since the moment she saw him last night replayed in a constant loop, forcing her to remember what she was doing, and why.

"He was... some kid I met in this tiny town I was staying in. He was really nice, but I mean, you saw him. Total dork." She grimaced at her own words, hiding her face in her cup.

'Total dork. The most wonderful, funny, insightful, caring, beautiful, intelligent little dork in the entire world.'

"And he came to the city to what? Surprise you at a concert?" Kali asked suspiciously.

"Yeah, he seemed pretty devastated that you weren't going back to hicksville with him. He musta had a big old crush on you, Janey." Dottie cooed, melodramatically fluttering her eyelashes as the rest of the gang joined her laughter and 'ooo's.

"No, no it wasn't like that at all. Mike doesn't like me that way... He just... I don't know I guess he-" El stumbled over her words, feeling embarrassed and pissed. "I guess he just wanted to try to prove to himself that he wasn't a total loser."

She almost felt herself smile. Mike had come all the way to the city to

surprise her, to show her that he wasn't a bad friend, to try to ask her not to be mad anymore, even thought she was the one who should have apologized. He stepped out of his comfort zone for her, doing something reckless and stupid when he was always so calculating and rational. For the hundredth time since she drove away last night, she felt her gut twist with just the slightest hint of regret.

'This is how it has to be. They are better off without you. They would have just left you. No one wants you. Mike doesn't want you.'

"So are you going to tell me what all of you have been doing? I never would have guessed you would come back to the city." El wanted to change the subject, trying as hard as she could to hide the quiver in her voice.

"I thought you would never ask." Axel sneered, standing up from his seat to go into one of his famous story tellings.

El listened fondly at the events they had all participated in over the last few years. They went on the lamb for awhile, driving all the way to New Mexico and joining up with some other travelers. Together they burned down a factory that tested horrible and painful experiments on animals. Then they were off to California, attending protest after protest, planning con after con. They drove back east a little bit, stopping in Salt Lake, then Knoxville, then coming up north again and heading to New York for awhile. Eventually they made their way back to Chicago to try to meet up with some older friends, one of those friend being El.

Kali got this look on her face when she mentioned 'taking care of' a couple of different people on her shit list. It was a look that sent chills up El's spine. It was the same look she had the night El left.

They seemed to have had a lot of fun. They seemed to hold no disregard for any of the crimes they had committed, or the people they had hurt. There was a time when El would have gladly joined them, and probably felt nothing too, but something inside of her had changed, and it scared her.

What scared her even more, is that when they took off after Kali's first 'hit', they had not come looking for her for over two years. Sure

they came back eventually to find her, but not until they were tired of doing everything else.

'This is for the best. This is what you deserve. Stop being so damn soft and get it together.'

They all chartered away, swapping stories and laughing. It almost felt like old times. Same old Dottie teasing everyone and everything, same old Funshine staying silent in the corner but laughing the hardest, same old Mick groaning at how she basically had to babysit everyone else. By the time they were all finally caught up on each others eventful (and fictionally eventful) lives over the past few years, Axel was complaining about wanting real food. El sighed and felt herself smile genuinely for the first time that morning. Same old same old.

"We are going to hit up the minute mart on 14th, you remember the routine?" Kali asked, looping an arm around El's shoulder. El nodded and smiled, she remember exactly. A good old fashioned supermarket sweep.

They began walking toward the old emergency exit door to the back of the building when Mick ran back inside, eyes wide and breathe labored.

"Cops!" Mick gasped, slamming the door shut behind her and lowering the makeshift barricade lock across its surface.

"Shit!" Axel ran to the side of the door, bracing himself against the wall and flicking the switchblade from his pocket.

The room became a flurry of people finding somewhere to hide, while also being ready for an attack. It was a silent, and articulated process that El had been through enough times to know what to do. She ran over to a small hazy window near the door, and pressed herself against the frame, so that she could lookout from her periphery without being seen.

What she saw on the other side of the window made her heart sink, and a gasp escape her lip.

It wasn't just any cop. It was Hopper, in his signature Hawkins Police Department truck. And he wasn't alone.

El's eyes fell on the head of shaggy black hair that emerged from the passenger side door. In the silence of the warehouse, everyone bracing themselves and holding their breath to hear each and every little thing, El was sure they would be able to hear the thumping of her heart through her chest.

Hopper and Mike.

They had driven all the way here, for the second time, to find her. Hopper had remembered the place that he had found her the first time, the place where she was abandoned, and afraid, and alone. Mike hadn't listened to her when she asked for no one back home to know, and somewhere deep inside of her she was glad he hadn't.

"Is that the kid from last night?" Kali breathed angry through her teeth, looking over El's shoulder.

"He brought the fucking cops!? I'm gonna rush him." Funshine began bracing himself at the door, readying his strength to run outside.

"No! No stop!" El panicked. She had seen how this played out enough times to know what would happen. "Let's just run out the back. Then we wait for them to come inside, and we bail."

The gang looked back and forth from El to each other. As the unwanted guests continued to approach, Kali motioned for everyone to follow her. El stayed only a few steps behind, using her anxiously thumping heart rate propel her forward. Dottie, Axel and Mick stayed a few feet behind, while Funshine took up the rear looking over his shoulder to make sure they weren't being chased. They ran up the metal stairs that lead to Kali's bedroom, and used one of the narrow roof access staircases to get out of the building.

Once outside, with the distance between Hopper and Mike greater, El felt like she could breathe again. Like the cool air and gentle breeze allowed her to fill her lungs, and clear her mind.

"We can take the fire escape down to the loading dock, and then we

can run to the van." Mick whispered in between labored breaths.

Kali nodded, and one by one the gang descended the rusty fire escape. It groaned from years of unuse, and shuttered with each step. The only way they were going to make it down without plummeting to the pavement below was if they went one at a time. Mick hurried first, hollering back that she would bring the car around. The others followed, their pacing a mixture of hurried running, and belligerent haste as not to make too much noise. Soon the only person left was El, watching Kali disappear over the edge of the building with a steadfast nod in her direction.

El watched her descent, hands braced on the railing as the harshly rusted metal dug into the palms of her hands.

Then she heard a voice from behind her.

"El?" Like a whisper. Like a plead. Like he was begging for her to listen, to understand. The tone that had haunted her since that day at the quarry. Mike.

She turned around slowly, painfully. Like she herself was brittle from years of rusting out in the cold. If hearing him made her heart stop and her blood turn to ice, then seeing him felt like having her heart completely ripped out.

She tried to keep her face straight, and her breathing steady, but when their eyes met, it was impossible for her breathe not to catch in her throat. He looked somber, rather than angry, and El could have sworn he had the red rimmed eyes of someone who had just been crying.

She didn't even dare look at Hopper as he stepped out of the shrouded doorway. She knew that would be too hard. Not with the parallels of seeing him walk out of the very room he had found her in. not in the place where everything began.

Her mind flashed to Kali as she heard the stairs groaning come to an end. The girl she had chosen to be her family, the person she had confided everything in, and grown up with. Kali hadn't always been so hard, but living the kind of life that she had can do that to a

person. Kali would go to the ends of the earth for El, or at least she would have. Now she wasn't so sure.

Her eyes flicked to Hopper for only a moment. To her father. To the family who had chosen *her*. He was gruff, and stern, and often distant, and a pain in the ass, but it was because he cared. Because he had had a daughter, and lost her. Because he was terrified of losing another one. He was hard on El because he cared about her, and he loved her, and he wanted her safe. He changed his entire life for a little bratty teenage gutter punk because he knew she deserved better.

Then El's eyes flickered to Mike's. His dark and deep irises emoting the most intense sadness El had ever seen in them. He looked defeated. He looked worried. He looked genuine, the way he always did, and that was what scared her the most. Reading the hurt that she had caused, the pain she thought she could avoid, coming to face her head on.

"Please just leave me alone." El choked out, bitter tears stinging her skin.

"Why? Why should I leave you alone?" Mike's voice was firm, but almost completely hollow. It made her blood boil. This is what she had wanted to badly to avoid. To never have to see.

"Because you don't want me! You don't want a person like me." Her voice was filled with malice. Not directed at him, but at herself. All of the self hatred came pouring out, and he was the unfortunate target.

"Says who!? El, I have wanted to be your friend since the first day I saw you! I ran outside after you when Tammy messed with you that day at lunch, Max just got to you first! I wanted to be your friend, and then I thought we were! More than friends even! But then you push me away, and get mad at me, and then run away!" Mike burst his temper matching hers, finally having had enough of this game they were playing with each other. Tired of skirting around the subjects that were painful.

"Mike you don't want someone like me! Im broken! No one has ever cared enough to stick around. I'm always waiting, every day, every

second, for you and Max and Hopper to decide you are tired of me and leave. And that isn't fair to you! Im angry and im bitter and im confused and im scared! My sister, my own god damn sister, the person who I trusted with my entire life left me to *die* here alone when I was just a kid! She didn't even stop once to think about me and she took off to fucking California without giving me a single thought! If the person who practically raised me is capable of that then... you and Hopper are capable of that too." Her eyes flooded all over again, and any semblance of composure she had vanished.

"El... I'm not them. I'm not the people you have known before. You had a hard, shitty life, and you haven't deserved a second of it. You are kind, and caring, and thoughtful, and crazy smart. You are so sweet, and so wonderful and I don't know what I would do if I lost you all of the sudden. We haven't known each other for very long, but you are one of my best friends. I know you wont believe me when I say that i'll never forget about you, but please, im begging you. Please just take this one day at a time. Because i'm not going anywhere, and one day you are going to look back and realize that when I promised to care about you forever, I meant it." Mike slowly made his way towards her, his heart on his sleeve.

El searched his eyes, searched for some sign of dishonesty, but she came up empty. He was always so damn hard to read. She wanted more than anything to be able to brush it off, to brush it all off because it just seemed easier. Running away seemed so much easier than trusting someone. Especially when that someone made her feel the way Mike did. She could feel her insecurity bubbling up, threatening to send her into another self deprecating tail spin, but the sight of Hopper stepping towards her with tears in his eyes curbed it.

"The same goes for me, kid. I already lost one daughter, and I thought I would never recover. I thought my life was over the day she left. I thought I would never love anyone ever again. But, you showed me that that wasn't true. You showed me that I could change, and be a better man. You brought light back into my life again, Jane. I know I haven't always been the best parent to you, but I swear on everything I have that I will always be here to love you." He walked toward her, his hat in his hands and his eyes sullen. She searched him too, looking for any indication about how she should feel, or what she

should do.

"I... I don't know what to say..." Her voice was little more than a whisper, swept away in the wind.

"You need to say that you love them back, Jane." Kali's voice caused El to whip around. She was perched just on the roof's edge, taking careful steps up from the fire escape.

"It was always me and you against the world. We were the only thing each other had, but that has changed now. Look, I know I'm not a good role model, and I sure as hell know that I wouldn't choose this life for someone I care about. I hated myself for leaving you behind, but I was selfish and caught up in my own bullshit. I knew that you were smart enough to take care of yourself and do something more worthwhile if I wasn't around. I would do anything to have people who love me the way your friends love you. I will miss you, I always have, but I'm telling you to leave and go with them because it's the right thing for you to do. You deserve that." Kali had never looked so... vulnerable.

El had held her sister on a pedestal for so long. She never faltered, never seemed to slip up, or make a mistake. She was always so *strong* when others were weak. And so steadfast in her beliefs that she would leave anyone and anything behind if it meant she could get forward. El had hoped she was immune to her sister's unabashedly disconnected lifestyle, but she wasn't. And now here she was, looking so small and feeble that it suddenly shifted things into a new perspective.

Kali was no superhero. She wasn't an all-knowing being of justice, or a voice of truth, she was just another mixed up kid that never had a chance. She made her choices, and now she had to live with them. Live ever on the run, and always looking over her shoulder because she created a world of chaos for herself that she could never leave.

And that isn't what El wants. All El really ever wanted was a home. And here are two people begging to give her one, and here she was turning her nose up at them because of her own stupid, pathetic insecurities.

El was stunned. So many conflicting thoughts swirled around her mind. It was like two sides of herself were fighting back and forth in her mind.

One side telling her she was pathetic, and undeserving of even the smallest amount of love or kindness. Telling her she belonged here in the city, in the streets, vying for attention from the person she had always aimed so desperately to please. That she needed to toughen up, and rebuild the shell she once held around herself at all times.

The other side telling her she deserved better. That Hopper loved her for a reason. That a man so sensible and caring couldn't possibly leave her. That she was worthy of a home, and a warm bed, and a goofy hard-ass father, and a family. That Mike cared about her, and was willing to prove that time and time again. That Max was a better sister than Kali had ever been. That Lucas, Dustin, and Will were better friends than the gang of heathens that had adopted her as a child.

She wasn't sure which side to listen too, or which side would win, all she knew is that her feelings seemed to want to burst out of her.

"I... I'm so sorry." El croaked, looking at Kali but speaking to all of them. "I'm so sorry that I did this. I'm just... so confused. And I don't know how to just... be happy. I don't know how to be content."

"That isn't your fault, El." Hopper walked towards her, reaching a hand out to sooth her. "All you have to do is try."

El collapsed into him, tugging on his shirt for dear life like he would float away in the breeze. He gently smoothed her hair and held her just as tight. Eventually Mike walked over too, rubbing her back as she cried.

She felt something break. Like the last piece of armor she had built around herself finally gave way. Like she could let these new people into her heart without even trying. The fear wouldn't go away, at least not for a long time, but it became clear that she loved them back. She loved her father and her friends with every fiber of her being, and she was finally willing to accept that.

She was finally willing to let them in. Here in the arms of the man she had come to think of a father, and one of the truest friends she had ever known, she wasn't even sure if she had a choice. She loved them, and it was finally time she let them love her back.

The car ride back to Hawkins felt like a dream.

El squeezed in the seat between Hop and Mike, the radio fading from static to Hop's favorite oldies station as they approached town, the familiar smell of cigarettes as she leaned her head against Hoppers arm as he drove.

After coming down from the roof, she said her goodbyes to Kali and that gang. Finally putting a period on the last sentence of a chapter of her life that was finished. It was the closer she never knew she needed. Kali promised to call whenever she could, they were still sisters after all, and nothing could change that.

She watched the city skyline vanish from view as they drove further and further away. With each mile it felt like the whole in her chest was closing. *Healing*. A suture to a wound. It felt like she was going home.

At some point along the ride, Mikes hand found hers, and she didn't let go until he was dropped off at his house. It was like some unspoken bound, saying all of the things that she wished she had said that night at the concert.

'I'm sorry i got so angry. It's not your fault. None of this was ever about you. Im crazy about you, Michael Wheeler, and I hope you can forgive me.'

When she got home, El called Max. They spoke briefly, mostly just crying and then laughing and making promises to see each other soon. Hopper made dinner, and he was kind enough not to talk about anything that had happened. Kind enough to leave the past in the past for now, and focus instead on bonding for real this time.

She didn't know if she would ever call him 'dad', but he was her *father*. And it was just nice to finally let herself feel like she was part

of something.

The parts of herself that told her '*you aren't good enough, and that's why everyone leaves you.*' wouldn't go away, not anytime soon at least, but they were quieted. Like a muffled voice from behind a closed door, or a pillow.

When she laid down to sleep, in a bed that was *hers*, in a room at was *hers*, in a house that was her *home*, she smiled. It finally felt like a new beginning. It felt permanent, and real, and not like something to get through or push past.

This was home.

She was finally home. All she had to do now was let it be one.

11. 11) Cherry Bomb

Hello! Sorry this took me awhile to update. I just wanted it to be perfect and to tie up some loose ends. We are reaching the end of this story very soon, and I honestly cant tell you all enough how much your lovely comments mean to me.

Hope you enjoy!

January 9th, 1987

It may have only been two days since her last shower, but the stink of a concert is a lasting one. El relished in the warm water and the feeling of being clean. It almost felt like washing all of the bullshit away. She emerged from the bathroom feeling like she had a fresh start. A renewal.

When she walked into her room, that's when it all really hit her. *Her* bedroom. The first things that had ever truly belonged to El and El alone. The posters that Hopper had taken her out to get before they moved. The quilt that his grandmother had made by hand, that was passed down through the family. The collection of vinyls and tapes that she had been able to buy, and the books she had been able to collect. A small assortment of new clothes that Hopper had taken her to get when she got out of the hospital because she '*needed clothes without holes in them*'.

It was all still so new. She wondered if a time would come where it didn't feel new anymore. Where it just felt normal. It felt like maybe it was beginning to change, like she was finally realizing she belonged. She just wished she had seen it sooner, and saved Hopper and everyone else the trouble.

El listened to the familiar sounds of Hop downstairs, going about his nightly routine. She wondered when *that* had become normal. It brought her a strange sense of comfort, to be living with someone who was nothing if not routine. It was almost like clockwork, as she counted down the minutes until she heard his droning snores coming from the other room. Just another facet of him that she could count

on, so long as she let herself.

Then came something unexpected. The sounds of tiny tapping on her window. Almost like someone throwing stones...

She threw a sweater on over the tank top she had changed into after her shower. With all of the sneaking out she had done, and all of the windows she had thrown stones at, she had never been the one on the receiving end. Her mind immediately jumped to a million conclusions as she tried to stifle the fluttering in her chest.

'It has to be him. Who else would it be?'

She crossed to the window and lifted it slowly so it made no noise, and peered out into the blackness of her backyard. It was hard to make out much more than a silhouetted figure wearing a hoodie.

"Mike?" El whispered into the darkness. She listened intently for his response, but all she heard in reply was the unmistakable giggle of one Max Mayfield.

"Sorry to disappoint, Hopper." Max cackle, stepping into the light. El felt her face flush and then shook her head at the sheer karma of it all. "Get your ass down here, or i'm going to come and kick it."

El shut the window and shimmied into a pair of jeans before creeping out the front door. Max was waiting on the front step, rolling her skateboard back and forth under the feet. When she heard El come outside, she shot up and turned around, swishing her orange hair out in the pale moonlight.

She took two easy steps towards El, scanning her face and grimacing, and then pulled her into one of the tightest hugs she had ever encountered.

"Jane El Hopper, if you ever do that to me again I will personally track you down and kill you and then kill myself and then kill everyone else." Max's voice was strained from the force of her hug, but El had never felt so loved.

"Jeez Maxine, never knew you got so murderous when you miss someone." El teased back after they broke apart.

"I didn't *just* miss you, you ass, you scared the hell out of me!" Max punched El's arm.

"I know, I know, i'm sorry. I scared the hell out of myself too. But i'm back, and i'm not going anywhere and i'm working on it." El took careful breathes and smiled as earnestly as she could.

"Well good. But if you ever feel like running away again just let me know and I'll come with you. And we can bring the boys with us. And Hopper. And Jonathan probably for Will's sake. And Steve will drive us." Max giggled, taking her seat back on the step.

"I think that's just like... moving. If it's that many people. That's like an entire family." El joined her on the steps with a crooked smile.

"Yeah and were all your family! And you aren't allowed to go anywhere without us ever again." Max punched her again. She was surprised to realize that she had missed it.

"That's fair." El chuckled, leaning her head on Max's shoulder.

The two girls talked for what felt like hours. El caught her up on everything that happened and everything that she had never told her. Max filled El in on her situation at home, and with her relationship with Lucas. It was like an unspoken agreement had been made, to be honest and to keep each other up to speed. It ended with both of them yawning and laughing and wiping tears from their eyes as they decided it was time for bed. It felt good, to have a friend like Max. It felt like home.

"Will I see you tomorrow?" Max smirked with one foot on her board.

"No, I think I might take the day off. Don't hunt me down though, i'll just be here." El teased.

"Yeah I probably would if I were you too. You gonna talk to prince charming anytime soon?"

"I think so." El sighed. "I don't know how i'm going to make all of this up to him."

"Just kiss him or something, that always works with Lucas." Max

laughed, but when she saw El's eyes widen she rested a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "Seriously El, he might love you more than I do. Just ask him out already and let yourself be the happy little dweeb you were always meant to be."

While there was sarcasm layered in her voice, El could tell her friend was being sincere. "Thanks Max, I love you too."

"See you later, Janey." And with that, Max skated down the walkway and onto the street. El didn't go back inside until her redheaded friend was out of sight.

The house was so quiet and warm, and the sounds of Hopper breathing made her feel so safe. It didn't take long to fall asleep, but all her dreams were filled with her friends.

And Mike and Mike and Mike.

January 10th, 1987

"Michael!" Karen's sharp voice pierced the silence in the basement.

Mike felt his eyes roll back into his head. All he wanted was five minutes of peace and quiet, and it seemed like that was the universe's last plan for him. Holly had bothered him for almost two hours when he got home from school, sitting on the couch and swinging her feet while she blabbed on and on about her friends at school. Under different circumstances, it may have been sweet, but Mike was in no mood.

He had finally gotten her distracted by cartoons upstairs, and he was relishing the chance to study in silence. All day, all he wanted was to be alone.

When El didn't show up to school, it had sent him in a tailspin he didn't know if he could crawl out of. Was she upset with him? Was she embarrassed? Was she scared? It all just felt like too much. He had done all he could do, and he just desperately wanted things to go back to normal. Even if normal meant quietly pining after a girl he was just friends with. He would kill to be just friends with her again.

if the alternative meant he couldn't see her anymore.

He sighed and stood up from his desk, and trudged up the stairs to find out whatever his mother deemed so important. To his surprise, she had a huge smile plastered across her face, and the house phone clutched to her chest.

"It's for you." She whispered, grinning somehow even wider than before. He felt his palms sweat as he reached for phone.

"H- hello?" Mike knew that it could have been anyone on the other side, but his stomach still filled with butterflies at the thought of who it *could* be. Who he wanted it to be.

"Hey Mike." Even across the staticy line, he could hear the smile in her voice. El's voice. Sounding as if nothing had happened. Sounding like herself.

"El! Hey! What... um.. What's up?" He stammered, grasping for some semblance of steadiness.

"I was... wondering if you would want to meet up with me?" He could practically see her twirling the phone cord around her finger.

"Yeah! Yeah totally! Um where? At your house? I could probably pick you up or um... I could just walk there! Or... Is anyone else going? Should I call-" His ramblings were cut off when she chuckled into his ear.

"No no. Just the two of us. I wanted to talk to you without any... distractions. Want to meet me at the quarry in 30?"

Mike looked down at his watch, and then up at his mother who was still standing obnoxiously close. She nodded at him. It was only 5:30, and even though the winter sun would be setting soon, he jumped at the opportunity.

"Of course! That sounds great i'll um... I'll meet you there."

"Cool, see you soon." It astounded him that she could remain so even keel through the line.

"Cool..." He breathed, feeling the corners of his mouth turn up. The line went dead and he turned around to see his mother holding her keys out for him.

"Wear a warm coat and be home by 10." She cooed.

He rolled his eyes but smiled anyway, doing as she said and grabbing a thick jacket from the coat rack.

The entire drive, a million thoughts crossed his mind. He wondered if he would ever stop over-thinking about El Hopper, but his gut told him that it wasn't likely when he ran a stop sign.

Driving down the same access roads he had ridden on his bike a million times, seeing the same trees he had played around with his friends, going to a place that had once held so many turbulent emotions for him. It all felt new. Taking El here all those weeks ago had given it new meaning. It was like El had reached into every facet of his life, and taken hold. Not that he was complaining, because it wasn't exactly her doing, it was his from the start. He just hoped with everything he had that she would stay. Regardless of what form she took in his life, be it friend, or acquaintance, or something more, he just wanted her to be happy. He just wanted to be a part of whatever life she wanted to lead.

Once he reached the dead end, he parked and sat in the silence for a few moments. Then, taking every ounce of courage he had, he stepped out into the cool, crisp air. It circled around him and frosted his breath as he walked through the tree line. Leaves and frozen soil crunched under his feet as he walked, but the thumping of his own heart was much louder.

Then he broke through the trees, and gazed out on the sunset across from him. It mirrored their date. The cold, the confusion, the desperation, a tender moment in a harsh landscape. And her. Sitting at the quarries edge, with her feet dangling above the icy water, and her loose curls swaying in the breeze. His breathe hiccuped as he made his way to her. She didn't turn around, but she scooted closer to the side of a large boulder so that he could join her on the edge.

If it had been anyone else, he wouldn't have. He would have argued

that it was dangerous, that the cliff could give way, that they would fall, but not with her. She made him feel almost invincible. She was simultaneously the strongest, and softest person he had ever met. El was nothing if not brave, but she had just as many fears as he did, and for whatever reason that made him trust her more than he ever thought possible.

So he took the seat next to her, and kept his eyes trained out on the setting sun.

"Im glad you came." El said softly, her voice hardly more than a whisper.

"Of course. I wanted to see you." It was then that he caught the double meaning in her words. It wasn't just here, this moment, it was him going all the way to Chicago. I was him showing up to the concert. It was almost an apology, not that he needed one.

She finally turned to look at him. "I wanted to see you too."

Mike turned to face her and grinned. She wasn't wearing any makeup, but her cheeks and nose were bright pink from the cold wind.

"We missed you at school today."

She swallowed and turned back to look at the water. "I just needed to give myself some time. I told Max I wasn't going to be there."

"That makes sense. Needing time."

"Im starting therapy again soon."

"That's probably a good idea."

She giggled, he almost swore she moved closer to him. "Yeah, it's definitely a good idea." She turned to look at him again, and she was definitely closer. Her arm pushed against his, and their misted breathe swirled together as it drifted away on the breeze. "Mike... im sorry."

"Sorry?"

"For everything. For being so... for the mess that I caused. It wasn't fair for me to put anyone through that, especially not you and Hopper. I thought I was doing the best thing but I regretted it the moment it happened. I was just confused and mixed up. I'm still trying to figure myself out, I guess. And i'm sorry. I really care about you and I guess it just... kind of blew my mind that you cared about me too."

"El, please don't apologize to me. Its really really okay, I don't hold any of what happened against you. I can't even imagine the things you have been through, or the feelings you must have. I just want you to be happy, and I knew you were just making a mistake."

Mike watched as her eyes glossed over with tears.

"Mike I... I really need to work on myself, and I know that now. That I need to reevaluate the way I feel about myself, and stop putting myself down all the time. It's not going to be easy, but I have to start somewhere, and well... I guess that's why I wanted to talk to you. Because I want to start with you... I can't promise that it's going to be easy, or that I won't push you away when things get hard but... I really like you Mike and I just-"

"El?" Mike interrupted her rambling. He watched the way she searched for the right words, and he settled with the fact that the right words probably don't exist. He knew that all too well.

"Yes?" She whispered.

He studied her for a moment. Taking in the sight of her rosy skin and watery eyes. The way she looked with no makeup on, and no mask to hide behind. It was just El. As she is, with no ulterior motive lurking beyond the surface, and with her flaws exposed.

"Can I kiss you?" It was a question he had wanted to ask, never quite knowing how, but in that moment he had never been so sure of anything.

"Yes." El sighed, her breath drifting across his skin.

Mike reached out to hold her face in his hand, and pulled her

towards him. El felt like a magnet, in more ways than one. Everything about her seemed to pull him in, he wanted to live in this moment. This moment of her honesty and openness. He felt his heart thumping against his rib cage as they grew closer. He watched her eyes fall closed just seconds before his did the same. And then, somewhere in the middle, their lips met.

It felt like the world around him fell away, leaving only the two of them behind. He felt himself trying to document every instant that passed. The softness of her lips on his, the smell of lavender and cigarettes that stained her skin, the feeling of her cold cheek in his hand, and her warm breath on his lips as she pulled away only to fall into him again.

You always hear people say that kissing someone is like a spark, or like fireworks, but to Mike it felt more like a bomb. Like everything else had been decimated. Like anything, any past hurt, or conflicted feeling, or concerns, or the hours he had spent shamelessly over thinking about this exact moment were gone, left miles behind. Nothing else mattered, and only El remained. They very well could have been the last two people on earth, they very well could fallen off the cliff, and he probably wouldn't have noticed.

For the first time in his life, he found it hard to think of anything else but her. No rambling thoughts, no spiraling out of control, no self criticism or worry, just El. Just the warm feeling of contentedness that grew in his gut and covered his skin in goosebumps.

When they finally pulled apart, both deciding that some point they had too, they stayed close. She rested her forehead against his and grinned, and he found himself captivated by her even when she was close she was blurry in his vision.

"Mike?" She finally asked into his ear.

"Yes?"

"Will you be my boyfriend?" Her voice was full of smiles. The sound reminded him of sunshine.

"I would love that." Mike wrapped his arms a little tighter around

her, and laughed to himself about the ludicrousness of the situation, and the fact that they should have done this months ago.

"What's so funny?" El asked, pulling away from his hug slightly while grinning herself.

"Nothing, just that I wish I had kissed you like... the day I met you."

"Which time? One the first day of school? Or when we trashed Thompson's classroom?" She teased.

"Neither. Definitely the time you were covered in garbage juice."

"Oh yeah? That kind of thing really get you going?" She shoved him playfully in the side.

Mike felt himself blush even harder against the cold air that tinged his cheeks.

"Mike Wheeler, you are one of the best things that has ever happened to me." Any semblance of sarcasm in her voice faded as she looked deep into his eyes. He saw only honesty, only truth. Only traces remained of the fear and self-doubt that had held her back for so long.

"El Hopper, you are one of the best things that has ever happened to me too." He watched a smile bloom across her face as he pulled her back into him. El rested her head against his chest and turned to watch the last of the orange sun duck behind the horizon.

January 11th, 1987

The next morning, El jumped out of bed at the first hint of morning. The smell of coffee downstairs, the first hints of a pale blue sunrise peeking through her window. She found herself *excited* to go to school. Excited to see Lucas, Dustin, and Will (and to laugh and joke with all of them), to see Max (and get another back breaking hug, and of course to see Mike (and maybe just skip lunch to kiss behind the school).

After their meet up at the quarry, he drove her home. Her cheeks

stained bright red as her fingers laced in his. She wanted to kick herself for waiting so damn long to just kiss the damn boy. And now, they were a couple. A real one. The kind that got to go on dates and cuddle up on couches together.

She danced around her room, listening to the mixed tape she had shared with Mike months ago. The one he gave back instead of kissing her that night in the middle of the street and it made her laugh. She felt so *light*. Like the weight on her shoulders had been hurled over the edge of the quarry.

'Mikes not mad at me. He forgave me. He likes me. I deserve this.'

So much of the normal minutia of getting ready felt silly now. So much of it seemed pointless. Hiding her eyes behind dark makeup and a scowl, Wearing heavy layers of thick denim and thrift store leather. Tiny bent cigarette butts she kept crumpled up in her pockets. Refusing to ever let herself be soft, or scared, or loved. It was all a mask.

None of it was a lie. She wasn't putting on an act, or pretending anything. She would always be that streetwise punk from the city. But she could be soft to. She could lower her guard and display her flaws. She could take off her armor when she wanted to.

So she skipped doing her makeup, and she skipped combing back her hair. She still put on a big leather jacket and ripped jeans, but she also wore the soft pastel sweater hopper had gotten her for Christmas. She checked out her appearance in the mirror, and smiled when she realized she felt more like herself than she had in a long time.

"El, we need to get going, you're gonna be late." Hoppers voiced bellowed from downstairs, with a hint of playfulness like he was singing a nursery rhyme.

El practically skipped down the stairs, jumping on the landing at the bottom with a heavy thud from her boots.

"Jeez kid, pink? Who are you and what have you done with El?" He smirked and she rolled her eyes and it all felt so natural. Like a real

father and daughter. It felt like she loved him, and now she knew that he loved her back.

They loaded up into his truck, both with a carefully balanced mug of coffee and an ego in hand. El haven't smoked since the morning in the warehouse, and Hopper was trying to quit too.

Less than ten minutes later, they were pulling up at the back of the parking lot. El caught a glimpse of Dustin trapped in a headlock by Lucas who was laughing so hard there were tears in his eyes. Will was there too, talking quietly with Max, and Mike was just getting off of his bike. Her heart stuttered at the sight of him in that same cable knit sweater from their date.

She ran down the hill to them, practically opening the door before it stopped and only half hearing Hopper yelling '*Be home by ten!*' at her as he drove away.

"El!" Dustin and Lucas hollered in unison.

"Holy shit, I didn't know you had curly hair." Lucas finally let go of Dustin's head and the curly haired boy beamed at her with those pearls of his.

"Yeah did you get a perm?" Max teased. She of course had seen the madness that was El's hair during sleep overs, but El giggled either way.

"Thought i'd try something new, is it working for me?" She pulled an awkward pose that sent everyone laughing again. It made her feel warm inside, it made her blush, and it felt like home. Then her eyes locked on Mikes.

His grin stretched across his entire face. He looked like the worlds dopest dope, and she wanted to kiss him so badly it hurt. So she grabbed his hand instead, and leaned against his side.

"Wait... did you guys finally?" Dustin began, darting from their interlocked fingers to their dumb grins, and back again.

"Did you finally get it the hell over with and ask each other out?" Lucas smirked and crossed his arms.

"Yeah um, we did." El and Mike shared a knowing glance and blushed harder.

"Finally." Will rolled his eyes and smiled. It sent another wave of laughter around the group as the bell rung and they headed inside.

Mike didn't let go of El's hand until they had to go opposite ways to class. She found herself staring down at her palm with a small secret smile all day. Mike made her feel airy, and loved, and his hands felt like home.

Like home like home like home.

12. 12) You and Me, Punk Rock Girl

Hey everyone! Soooo I decided to cut this fic a chapter shorter than planned. Im sorry for that, but I was writing what would have been the chapter before this one and it just felt like needless fluff (not that needless fluff is bad) but it just wasn't were I wanted the story to go. So! Im wrapping it up today, and I really hope you enjoy it!

March 7th, 1987

The first warm day in months.

Well, not totally warm. The temperature still definitely called for a jacket, just maybe not a thick one. The last snow had melted away weeks before, and for once it actually wasn't raining. So by all accounts, (aside from Max who insisted it was still freezing), the weather was nice.

Nice enough that when El woke up, there was soft warm light spilling across her bedroom, and the trees out of her window showed the first signs of spring. There was just something about seeing the seasons change that always made El smile. Living in the city for most of her life, the days shifted often dramatically from bleak and frigid, long nights curled up under several ratty blankets, to sweltering and humid. Where the sun bounced back off of the pavement and metal siding of the warehouse, and made your clothes cling to your body.

But being here, with miles and miles of trees surrounding the small town, and acres upon acres of farmland, you could not only feel the seasons, but you could see them.

It was a Saturday, but she jumped out of bed at the wee hours of 9am (terribly early by her standards). It had been over two months since her debacle with Kali, and over two months since her relationship with Mike became an official one. It also marked two months back in therapy, and three weeks of particularly good days. She was feeling happier than ever. Her relationship with her friends stronger, and her relationship with Hopper finally felt like a family. She was pretty sure

she would never call him 'dad', but now it seemed like she didn't even need too. He was her dad, and it came with no strings attached. No need for formalities or conditions. She loved him, really and truly, and she finally let herself know how much he loved her too.

The best part about today, however, wasn't simply the good weather, it was her plans for what to do with it; Meeting up with her friends downtown. She wanted to go to the record store with Will, maybe even go see a movie as it got later with Max. Just spend a day having fun, without worry or concern. Having Mike as a boyfriend had helped her grades stay up and her homework completed, and now the weekend was hers to do with as she pleased.

Hopper hollered up the stairs that he had been called into work, so El would have to walk to meet Max downtown, but she didn't really mind.

She set out in a denim jacket and her favorite ratty chucks, smiling softly at the trees she passed. There were birds coming back now, and she listened to their rhythmic patterns to one another, like giggly little messages between school children. There were older women digging in recently thawed soil, planting bulbs that would bloom in the summer. There were small children enjoying Saturday activities like hopscotch, jump rope, and made up games where the rules seemed to change with each turn.

It all fostered something deep within El's heart. A feeling of community. A feeling of something wholesome and simple. These streets were clean, the houses were well kept, the people often wore warm smiles and waved at passersby. El was almost certain she wouldn't want to live in Hawkins forever, no it was far too small and quiet, but she suddenly saw herself falling in love with this little town. Wherever she went, whatever she did, Hawkins would always be the place she called home when she was young, regardless of whatever came before it.

As she turned onto bustling Main St, she saw Max coasting down the sidewalk a couple of blocks down. The redhead kicked off and sped up, and dodged a man carrying delivery boxes. El smiled and shook her head and cupped her hands around her mouth.

"Slow down Madmax! You're gonna kill someone!" El hollered in her direction.

Max's head whipped up, turning on a dime to meet El. She jumped off just inches away, and kicked the board into her waiting hand. "Asking a zoomer not to zoom is like asking a fish not to swim."

"Maybe, but most fish don't run down little old ladies carrying their groceries." El teased and hooked an arm around her friend.

"That was one time, and Mrs. Rigby sucks anyway." Max giggled, and held tightly to El's waist. It made walking a little hard, but soon the two girls were laughing to hard to care. They walked back up the sidewalk to meet the boys who had most likely ditched their bikes in some alley. Lucas and Will waved, Dustin hollered a boisterous hello, and Mike beamed down at them as they approached.

"Hey, Dustin and I want to hit the arcade while its empty, that way we don't have to wait for any games. You wanna come?" Lucas asked Max with a smirk, knowing she wouldn't be able to pass up the opportunity. She nodded and let go of El, stepping around the others to lock hands with Lucas. "Anyone else want to come?"

"El and I were going to go to the record store, but we can join you guys after." Will answered softly.

"What about you Mike?"

"Actually, if it's okay, i'd like to go with you two." Mike looked suddenly like he was encroaching on a private conversation rather than just addressing his best friend and girlfriend.

"Of course, Randy will be happy to see you again." El smirked, locking her fingers around his and pulling him with her in the direction of the shop. The entire walk down she could hear Dustin and Max arguing about Dig Dug and it made her heart feel content.

The record store was one of those places that stays the same even when it changes. New posters and cardboard cutouts, new rare vinyls on the wall behind the counter, new patches in the glass case, but always the same energy. The same hazy interior and funky smell

greeted them just before the same Randy would wave hello from the back room.

El and Will quickly got lost in combing the rows, showing each other their great finds and laughing over stupid album artwork. Mike thumbed through a crate of dollar records looking for names he knew. Most of them were for female singers he was pretty sure his mom liked, but there was gold to be found everywhere.

"That's a great score kid, a real choice get." Randy said, suddenly looming over Mike's shoulder. Mike wasn't even sure *what* he had in his hands. A beat up and well loved Bob Dylan record called 'Blood on the Tracks'. Mike wasn't sure what was so great about it, it looked maybe warped, and definitely old.

"I... I should get it?" Mike stuttered.

"Yeah man, Bob Dylan is classic. Dudes a real punk rocker even if he doesn't sound like it. Got a voice like a couple angry crows man. Poetry." Randy nodded to himself and organized a couple of crates with new inventory.

Mike wasn't sure how someone with a voice like 'angry crows' could be good, let alone poetry, but he trusted Randy's suggestion. He added it to his small stack and looked up to see El spinning Will on the same bar stool she had made him sit on weeks before. They had unplugged the headphones and something loud and screechy had filled the space of the shop.

"So you and El an item?" Randy muttered, staring down his nose at Mike who suddenly felt about 2ft tall.

"Yeah we are." Mike melted into a dopey grin, feeling the layers of anxiety fall away while he watch El dance through the aisles.

"That's a good get too man. El is a real road warrior. Wouldn't wanna take her in a fight. You kids go to that show in Chicago?" Randy leaned back against the tables and ran a hand through his greasy hair.

"We did actually. I didn't want to go but... I guess I got talked into it."

Mike smiled to himself more than to Randy. He figured Randy was probably the one that told El about the Fugazi show in the first place.

"Right on little dude. I knew you had the spirit in you. You guys going to the show tonight?"

"Who is it?" Mike felt his hands grow clammy around his stack of records. Concerts still weren't exactly a fun topic of conversation for him.

Before Mike could say anything else, he was being ushered towards the corner where El and Will were currently crying with laughter. Randy clicked off the record player and turned on the 8-track. He pulled a bright yellow tape from his pocket and pressed it into place.

What played wasn't exactly what Mike might have expected. Rather than loud or droning vocals, the voice was guttural and intense. The music was fast, lively, with a reggae vibe that through him for a loop. Just as punk, but soulful, just as angry, but with intention.

"This, kid, is Bad Brains. The best damn band of the last decade." Randy smiled smugly at the look of astonishment on all of their faces. He pulled a folded flyer from the same pocket the tape had been in, and handed it to El.

"Holy shit Randy this rules." El beamed, eyes scouring the crumpled flyer. Will nodded and moved to turn it up louder.

"You said they were playing tonight?" Mike had to yell a bit, but Randy nodded. "In Chicago?" He nodded again.

"Aw man I bet this is great live!" Will bopped to the beat of the song.

Mike looked between the three of them. Will who loved music more than anyone, maybe other than Jonathan, El who was having the time of her life just listening in this grimy little shop, and Randy, who almost seemed to be egging him on.

"Why don't we go and find out?" Mike yelled over the sound, and suddenly all eyes were on him.

El turned down the music before facing him. "Do you mean it? You

would want to go see them live? It would be just like last time, I mean aside from..."

"Yeah I know, it sounds fun. Let's do it! I can try to borrow my moms car and we can see if the others want to come too!" Mike half expected El to either laugh in his face, or brush it off for his sake, but instead she pulled him into such a tight hug that it nearly forced all of the oxygen from his lungs.

"Come on let's go get them from the arcade! And then we can stop by your moms house! Oh i'll have to go get changed first but we have time!" El yelled excitedly, grabbing her bag and rushing out the door, flyer clutched tightly in her hand. Will followed close behind with a similar giddiness in his step.

"Your welcome for that little dude. Have the night of your life and don't let her get away man, she's a lifer."

Mike nodded, although not quite sure what a 'lifer' was, but he could feel it probably meant something good. Randy liked El, how could he not? Mike payed for the three records from the dollar bin, and then walked out onto the bright street. He saw that El and Will were already a few blocks down, talking excitedly. He smiled to himself and followed them, just happy they were happy. There was some nervousness growing in his chest, like maybe El would want to leave again, but it was greatly outweighed by the voice in his head telling him that she wouldn't do that. She had been doing so well, and the rain cloud that seemed to loom above her had drifted off in the months that had passed since the last concert.

And this time, he would be with her the entire step of the way, and he was even looking forward to it.

Convincing the others hadn't been hard.

Max had spent all of her quarters anyway, and Lucas was pretty much down to do whatever Max wanted to do, and Dustin was down to do pretty much anything anyway.

Convincing his mom, however, was proving not to be so easy.

"Michael, I just don't feel comfortable letting you drive all of your friends that far." Karen frowned at him, one gloved hand curled on her hip, the other hand still holding a soapy plate that she had been washing.

"It's just going to be for one night, and I promise to drive the speed limit, and I've never even gotten in an accident." Mike was practically begging at this point. He had told his friends to wait outside, and he could see them sitting around in the grass out of the kitchen window. He had of course lied, and said they wanted to go to a midnight premiere of Predator (despite it not coming out for another three months). Sometimes it was really nice that his parents had no idea what his interests were.

"I know that, Michael, and I trust you, it's everyone else I don't trust. There are a lot of crazy people out there, and a lot of drunk drivers on the road." Karen pressed her lips together tightly, still clearly weighing the choice in her mind. "Is your little girlfriend going with you?"

Mike looked out the window at El, who was playing with the grass under her fingers and smiling in the sun. his heart sped up for just a moment. "Yeah, she is going, why?"

"Well I still haven't properly met her. What if she gets you in trouble?" It was a bullshit excuse, and Mike could tell even his mom knew it. He stifled an eye roll.

"She's the police chief's daughter, how much trouble could she get me in?" Mike said flatly.

Karen sighed and dropped her dish back into the sink. She kept her gaze out the window at Mike's friends (more specifically El) and took off her pink cleaning gloves slowly.

"You really like this girl, don't you?" Karen asked quietly. It was a question that Mike wasn't expecting. He figured that it was probably some weird parent logic, but he answered honestly.

"Yeah, I really do" His words carried a weight that filled the room. *Liking* El was an understatement, but it was still the truth.

Karen drummed her perfectly manicured nails against the counter before turning to him with an expression he couldn't quite place. "Okay. take the car, but you will tell me when you get home, and you will return it with the same amount of gas you took it with. Do you understand me?"

"Yeah! Yeah of course!" Mike's face lit up and he nearly jumped out of his shoes with excitement. "You're the best mom, thanks!" If they were closer he may have even hugged her.

He grabbed the keys from their hook by the door and turned to wave goodbye.

"Be safe!" Karen yelled as he slammed the door. She stood by the window and watched him excitedly tell his friend the news. They all cheered and ran to the car. She watched Mike offer a hand to help El get up from the ground, even though she probably didn't need help at all. She watched Mike hook an arm around her shoulder, and say something to her that made the curly haired girl laugh. "And have fun."

The Party piled into Karen's car, debating over who got to sit where. Then they headed to El's house to hang out until it was time to drive the few hours it would take to get to the city. El put on some records to get everyone in the mood, and her and Max went up to El's room to get changed. El made a quick call to the police station to tell Hopper about her plans, and he made some lame joke that he '*better see her tomorrow or he's sending a search party*' that made her laugh and roll her eyes. It just felt nice that he trusted her despite everything that has happened.

El slicked back her hair, something she hadn't done in a week or too, and smoked out her eyes the way she liked. Max even let El rim her eyes with a waxy black liner that made her eyes water a little bit.

As the time got closer, Max returned down stairs to where the boys were lounging around, and Mike decided to sit on El's bed while she finished her makeup. It was intriguing to watch. When he was younger, he used to sit in Nancy's room and watch her do her hair and makeup. It always fascinated him, like art but for your face.

Sitting there, with Sonic Youth drifting through the room from downstairs, he felt his anxiety begin to twist in his stomach again. Bouncing his leg, he decided to pace around El's room. He looked at the posers on her walls, and the art she had pinned up from Will. He looked at her books and magazines, her hair products, and the pile of jackets on the chair in the corner. It didn't help much, and it must have looked as strange as he felt because El giggled from her place in front of the floor length mirror.

"You trying to find a cute skirt to wear?" El teased, smirking at him in the reflection.

"No im... I guess i'm just anxious." Mike admitted, rubbing the back of his neck.

El uncrossed her legs and stood up, turning to face him. She looked beautiful, and very classically El. A leather jacket, a Descendants shirt tucked into ripped up black denim jeans.

"Its okay to be nervous. The last show you went too didn't... go very well, and it was literally all my fault. But I promise you will have fun, and i'll be with you the entire time." She looked guilty and somber.

"I know, i'm not really worried about that I just. I feel like i'm... I wont look like the rest of the people there. I'll be out of place." Mike muttered, looking past El's shoulder into the mirror. He remembered the last concert. The spiked hair, the ripped clothes, the makeup, the chains and leather. He was just some scrawny boy in a striped shirt with puffy hair.

"So what?" El smirked, drawing his attention back to her. "You don't have to look like everyone else, most of the people that go to shows are posers anyway." She crossed the small space between them and wrapped her arms around his neck. He still looked unsure.

"You aren't going to be embarrassed to be seen with a nerd?" There was a playfulness to his voice, but it didn't reach his eyes.

"Hell no. I love your little striped shirts and sweaters. Going to shows isn't about what you wear," Her voice slipped into a half-hearted impression of Randy, "Its about feeling the music, man."

This last did make Mike chuckle. "So you really don't care? No one is going to beat me up or steal my lunch money?" He finally wrapped his arms around her waist, pulling her closer.

"Of course not, I wouldn't let them even if they tried. You can go to this show with me, decked out head to toe in your best dork gear, and you will still be the coolest guy there." El pressed a tiny kiss to his cheek and turned back to the mirror. "Just like how when we go to prom, im going in chucks and a t-shirt."

Mike blushed. "El Hopper, did you just ask me to prom?"

Now it was El's turn to blush. Mike watched her eyes widen in the mirror and she whipped around to face him again. "Yeah I guess I did. Damn, and I didn't even get you an oversized teddy-bare, or hire a singing telegram or anything."

Mike laughed so hard that he fell onto the bed, but not before he reached for El's arm and pulled her down with him. They landed in a heap, covering the piles of clothes El had deemed unworthy of tonight's outing, both laughing. Mike laid out flat and El propped her head on his chest to look up at him.

"Okay well how about I forget you asked and then you can still surprise me?" He asked, still giggling, and looking down at her in a way that anyone else would consider an unflattering angle.

"That sounds fair. Unrelated, how much do you think I would cost for me to get Stan Lee to come to Hawkins? I need him to ask a super dorky kid a really important question."

"Don't even joke about that, I might pass out if I ever met Stan Lee."

"Um who said it was for you? Maybe I want him to ask Dustin something." She tapped her chin contemplatively and then they were both laugh again. Mike kicked himself for feeling so worked up over something so stupid. El was perfect.

"Ask me what?" Dustin said from the doorway, grinning slyly. El rolled off of Mike and sat up to look at the curly haired boy in the doorway.

"I'm asking you to prom." El giggled.

"God, right in front of me?" Mike pressed a hand to his chest in mock offence. Dustin looked stunned for all of about two second before he snorted laughter.

"Sorry Wheeler, the ladies can't resist my pearls." He purred and everyone but him rolled their eyes. "I came up here to tell you it's time to go."

"Okay, we'll be down in a sec." El smiled and Dustin thumped back down the stairs. El checked herself out in the mirror once more before turning back to Mike.

She crossed to him, wrapped her arms around his neck, and kissed him. Her kisses always made him feel like he was floating, but this one carried with it an aura of assurance, and something that almost felt like love. Her lips danced gently across his and for a moment he forgot all about where they were going and what they were doing.

"Now, if you ever feel nervous, just tell me and i'll do that." Her lips were still dangerously close to his own.

"Um, okay, im nervous." He joked, and she pinched his cheek.

"Come on, Wheeler, were gonna be late." El rolled her eyes at his dopey expression, and grabbed his hands, ushering them both out of her room and downstairs where the others were waiting.

There was only one thought in Mike's mind, as they headed out to his car, never letting go of one another, and a smile bloomed across his face. *'El hopper is going to be the death of me.'*

The drive to Chicago was almost the best part of the entire night.

Max, Lucas, and Dustin all sat squished into the backseat of Karen's car. Will, being the smallest of the group, sat more or less on the middle console. He had raided El's tape collection, and played DJ the entire trip. The group sang loudly and out of tune to whatever song blared through the speakers. El danced around in the passenger seat, Lucas and Will started a pseudo push pit in the back. Max flung her

hair around, laughing wildly. At one point Dustin stuck his head out of the window and hollered into the evening air at oncoming traffic. Mike just tried to stay under the speed limit and pay attention to the road, but even he danced and sang to the songs he knew.

They arrived in the city just after sunset. It grew before them like a galaxy of stars. All twinkling lights against the inky skyline. None of the sorrow or loneliness that El had felt the last time she made this trip resided in her now. Every time it reared up in her gut, she would look to the handsome boy behind the wheel, or at her friends in the rearview mirror and feel assured. Feel at peace.

She held the flyer she snatched from Randy in her hands, and directed Mike on where to go. As they turned down street after street, El looked out on all of the sights she had once called home. A warehouse on 4th street, a minute mart she swiped candy from, an old swing set in a park, dark alleys illuminated by blinking red exit signs. Some places held happy memories, but most held nothing but loneliness. It astounded her just how foreign it all felt. It was all behind her now, and in the morning she would go back to her bed, in her room, at her house, and she would be with her real family. And as she turned in her seat to look at her friends who were playing air instruments, she felt that they had been her family from the beginning. It just took her her whole life to find them.

Mike found parking across the street from a bar just a couple of blocks from the venue. The streets were crawling with gutter punks and drunken idiots. The walk to the venue was just like before. The boys looking painfully out of place, but not really caring. El and Max fit the part on the surface, but it would have been clear to anyone looking that they were different than all the rest.

Loud, bass heavy music reverberated off of the walls of the squat brick building. A bright red neon sign hung above the door, reading 'Upside Down Theater', and below a flickering fluorescent marquee with the words 'Bad Brains. Doors open 9pm'. El ushered them inside, where a sea of people swayed and moved to the music. The venue smelled like cheap beer and sweat, and the same musky odor that resided in Randy's record store. You could feel the bass bouncing through the floorboards, and feel the electricity in the air from the guitar.

El led them around to the far wall where the crowd thinned out. In the center of the room was a large circle of people pushing and shoving one another, but no one seemed to get hurt. People danced, people closer to the stage yelled the words along with the men on stage. A huge tapestry hung behind them with a lighting bolt striking the Washington D.C. Capitol building, against a bright yellow background.

It didn't take long for Max to pull Lucas closer to the front of the crowd. She was too short to see much in the back, and she learned from her last trip that it was more fun to be right in front, and away from the push pit. El watched her best friends red hair disappear into the mass of moving bodies with a smile and happiness in her heart. Max really was born to be a punk rocker.

At some point in between songs, Dustin and Will found a couple of crates to stand on so they could have a better view. The front man, who called himself H. R., went into a speech about society and politics that made the crowd go wild. El cheered loudly and chanted with the rest of the audience.

In that moment Mike felt like he was truly a part of something bigger. A part of history. A part of something so different from the world he had grown up in. It made him feel angry and happy all at the same time, and it made him understand just how sheltered he had been until El came in, like a storm, and turned everything on its head. She really was a road warrior, and he wanted to go with her on whatever road it was.

Once they started playing again, El grabbed his hand and pulled him deeper into the crowd. He started to sweat as they neared the mass of people who were shoving and throwing themselves around wildly.

"It's fun I promise! Just don't fall down!" El yelled over her shoulder at him, and then let go into the pit. He watched her for a moment, slamming against people, spinning around and laughing, pushing people away, being pulled from side to side. Then, against his better judgment, he joined her. It felt crazy and stupid, but he couldn't help feeling exhilarated. Eventually he got knocked into the side, and lost his footing. He would have fallen if El hadn't caught his wrist and pulled him away from the chaos.

"What's the point of that!?" Mike yelled into her ear once they had found a safer place to stand.

"Sometimes when you're mad, it feels good to shove people around!" El said, liveliness flickering in her eyes.

"Is everyone here mad!?"

"If you *aren't* mad, then you aren't paying attention!" El responded with a smirk. She hoped he would get it. El watched Mike look around. At the pit they had come from, at the crowd around them, at the people on stage, and he nodded.

"Yeah I guess I am pretty mad!" Mike laughed.

El wanted to look back at the stage, but she couldn't take her eyes away from him. The way he was experiencing it all for the first time. That he was learning and growing. That he had helped her learn and grow in a way she never knew that she needed.

She stepped closer to him, looking up the measurable distance between their eyes, and smiled. She cupped his face, bringing him down to her level and kissed him with a passion saved only for him. It was longer than any of their kisses before. She let her arms drape around his neck as he clung to her hips and pulled her closer. It felt like the entire crowd of people faded away around them.

It seemed so obvious then. That she had been chasing a life where who you are, and what you stand for didn't matter. That you could be anyone and anything regardless of where you started, or what odds were stacked up against you. And while she had dedicated herself to that belief, she had never let it be true for her. She had told herself she would always be alone and easily forgotten. But it wasn't true, and it never had been. She could love others the way they loved her if she wanted. She could have friends and a home, and be safe and happy and still never let her values slip.

In the early hours of the morning she would go back to a quiet and sleepy town, and go to bed in her safe and loving home. She would wake up and see her friends again, and again every day after that. She would continue to heal and grow, and shape people around, and

let herself be shaped back. She would eventually leave Hawkins for a new adventure, but she would have a father to call home too, and friends to visit. She would do something impactful with her life without hurting anyone in the process, not even herself.

And all the while, she would be in love with a dorky boy from Hawkins Indiana who wore striped shirts, and had poofy hair, and read comic books.

It was so clear. So clear it made her want to cry and scream and sing and dance. So clear that when their kiss finally broke, and they stepped apart, there were tears in her eyes and a smile on her face, and she held his hand as the song ended.

And she decided their and then that she loved him. And that Bad Brains was the probably the best band of all time.

They left the venue at about midnight, and headed back towards home.

The streets were quieter now. Only a few other cars sped by them as Mike turned onto the freeway. El watched the city fade from view as they traveled. She watched as the high rise buildings and neon signs turned into specs on the horizon behind her. She looked at Max who had fallen asleep on Lucas shoulder, and then at Lucas who had fallen asleep on Dustin.

It felt like the suturing of a self inflicted wound. A hole she had created, and only she could let heal. A hole she had replaced with these people here.

Will, who had put on a slow and quiet mixtape for the drive home. Who had spent the entire night looking at the stage with the same captivation that some people have in church. Who was one of the sweetest and most caring people, but who also had a wound *he* was trying to heal. Will, who filled his heart with love and art, and music, and people, and who loved harder than most.

Lucas, who would always be the voice of reason in a group full of big personalities. Who would tell you exactly what you needed to hear,

even if it's not what you wanted. Who spent the entire night getting lost in a world so different from his own because he was open minded, and just wanted to support his friends. Who would do anything and everything in his power to be good to the people he cared about.

Dustin, who had his face pressed against the passenger window, and his breath fogged the glass each time he snored. Who had blown his vocal cords by yelling and cheering for a group of people he had never met, and knew nothing about. Because he was supportive and loving, and was always the first to want to participate in any adventure. He could make you laugh even if you were in the worst mood imaginable, and who would always stand by your side if you needed an ally.

Hopper, who was probably sleep at home, but would wake up when he heard the door open just to make sure everything was okay. Who would make breakfast in the morning, even if it was just coffee and toast. Who had taken her in because she needed a home, and he needed a reason to love again. Who had lost a daughter, but gained another in a way he never thought possible.

Max, who had tired herself out dancing to songs she didn't know. Who never let her life or family interfere with being a painfully devoted and loyal friend. Who would attack any obstacle in her way. Who had been the first kind face that El ever found in Hawkins, and who had literally picked her up from the ground, dusted her off, and been by her side ever since.

And Mike. Mike, who had traveled for miles to bring home a girl that felt she didn't deserve it. Who would sacrifice himself or his time for anyone that needed it. The best kind of friend, the kind that is impossible to shake off because he cares so damn much. Mike, who had given El the courage and support to live life for the first time, and who continued to be the hope that motivated her.

El decided then, that a family is whoever you want it to be. It's not the people that raise you, although it can be, but it's those that shape you. It's the people you meet along the way, that lift you up when you are at your lowest points, and help you become a better person. These people, these chaotic, and wild, and loving, and dorky people

were her family.

And while her mind often drifted to Kali and the gang from before, it was never with the same guilt or resentment. Now she only wished that they would find the same love and peace that she had found. Because they deserved a second chance if they ever gave themselves one.

So El sat back in her seat, with her legs curled to her chest, and she rested her hand on Mike's. He smiled at her sleepily, and she felt with an undeniable assurance that she would love him forever. All she had to do, was love herself first.

So that's the end folks. I'm sorry again that I cut it a chapter short, but I really felt like this is how the story needed to end. I am going to be starting other projects soon, so keep your eyes peeled if you like my writing! You can always come over and talk to me on Tumblr [michael-hearteyes-wheeler](#), and request a oneshot or drabble or whatever else! I really hope you have enjoyed this fic, and I hope to see you on the next one!